



## Gifts to veterans draw smiles at Palm Beach County holiday event

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Michael Marchese Jr., who served in the U.S. Navy from 1982 to 1988, has been staying in the VA Medical Center's nursing home for about three weeks and is awaiting a January surgery.

It gets lonely in the hospital, he said.

But Marchese was all smiles Tuesday morning as volunteers handed out gift baskets to veterans staying in the center's Community Living Center, located at West Blue Heron Boulevard and North Military Trail.

"It's nice when people come out, and show support and appreciation," Marchese said.

**Shopping for Soldiers Needs** — an organization that provides a shopping network to veterans, their families and donors for basic necessities such as snacks and toiletries — provided the gift baskets. Neal Bellinger, operations director, assisted passing out the baskets.



Jerry Bianto, who served in the Navy from 1944 to 1946, said he appreciates the gift basket and his new American Legion Riders shirt and hat.

Edward McKeon, Florida veterans service officer for the American Legion, also handed out gifts. Since 1995, McKeon has been volunteering at the VA Medical Center, where he met and befriended U.S. Army veteran David Scanlin. McKeon jokes that he sneaks in pretzels and cheese puffs to Scanlin, who enjoyed the nice gift-giving surprise.

Santa Claus, also a veteran whose real name is Kenneth Dayle, made an appearance but did not need his elves' help to hand out the gifts. Other volunteers were West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel and some of Palm Beach Gardens High School's Junior Navy ROTC members.

"In a sense we are here and safe because of [the veterans]," Frankel said. "It's important to thank them, especially this time of year."

Said Robert Wonyetye, 15 and a sophomore from Palm Beach Gardens High: Their smiles were contagious."

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