

## WJCS 'Dream Team' greets the season at gift drive

By DEBORAH ANDERS

Dedicated volunteers and special guests celebrated the spirit of giving at the Westchester Jewish Community Services' Have-A-Heart Holiday Gift Drive on Nov. 22 at the Scarsdale home of board member Linda Plattus.

Since 2005, the gift drive has raised more than \$40,000 in toys and gift cards for children in underserved communities throughout Westchester County. Last year alone, the organization collected gifts for more than 1,500 children.

"I can tell you firsthand the kids and their parents are unbelievably thankful," said Robin Gottlieb, a social worker at WJCS's Mount Vernon clinic, one of four standalone centers in the region. "It can make the difference between a parent not being able to give their kid literally anything for Christmas and giving a gift."

Guest speaker Monica Brennan, a social worker whose clients have developmental disabilities and who works at the WJCS in Yonkers, described the goal of the organization's "wraparound services."

"It's not just working with a client coming to the office, it's us diving into their entire lives, helping them, finding out where there's a gap and where we can fill that gap," said Brennan.

Brennan introduced one of her clients, Mary Cruz, a mother of eight, and her son Eliel, who has autism.

"The WJCS came into my life at the worst moment and helped me with the system," said Cruz. "They helped me



DEBORAH ANDERS PHOTO

Monica Brennan, Eliel and Mary Cruz, Susan Lewen, Rebecca Sigman, Linda Plattus, Michele Brettschneider, Sarah Kayle and Suzanne Yearley

inside the clinic and outside in the community. I can say they are my family."

WJCS is one of the largest nonprofit agencies in Westchester, providing community-based support and counseling services for those affected by mental health illness, trauma and developmental disabilities, in addition to advocacy programs for older adults, families and children of all ages.

Chief Development Officer Susan

Lewen acknowledged the organization's active administrative staff members, who are "changing the lives of individuals every day. We call them the Scarsdale Dream Team," she said.

Plattus thanked everyone who had contributed over the years to help those "who don't have the resources to go out and buy holiday gifts for their children." She relayed a WJCS success story about a client with mild to severe

mental and social disabilities who now takes public transportation, lives on her own and volunteers with the ASPCA and PetSmart.

"The woman said, 'For the first time in my life, I feel happy and I feel proud,'" said Plattus.

For more information or to donate a gift, visit [wjcs.com/have-a-heart-for-the-holidays](http://wjcs.com/have-a-heart-for-the-holidays).