CULTURE EVENTS NEWS

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Making Lives Easier, One Toy at a Time

Rick Love | December 19, 2025

For Oliver Thigpen, service isn't just a chapter of his life—it's a lifelong commitment.

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Oliver's commitment to causes greater than himself goes back more than four decades. From the Marine Corps to family life, professional responsibilities, and charity, he knows what it means – and the dedication it takes – to serve both country and community.

Answering the Call

October 23, 1983 was a pivotal date in American history, and one that would have a significant impact on Oliver himself. Two buildings were bombed in Beirut, Lebanon, causing the deaths of over 300 people, including 241 Americans—220 of which were United States Marines. Driven by a deep sense of duty and selflessness, Oliver decided to make a difference by enlisting in the Marine Corps in 1985.

After completing basic training at Parris Island and Amphibious Warfare School at Camp Lejeune, Oliver spent the next 13 years serving his country as a United States Marine, eventually rising to the rank of Staff Sergeant. His assignments took him all over the US and even as far away as Okinawa, Japan, where he developed a leadership style driven by honor, integrity, respect, accountability, teamwork, and putting others first.

Service Beyond the Service

Oliver left the Marine Corps in 1998, but its values never left him. He took what he learned as a Marine and used it to better his community. 17 years ago, he became involved with Toys for Tots, where he organized and ran toy drives for families in need all over the United States.

"For me, it's about seeing those happy faces," says Oliver. "It's one of the things I look forward to the most at Christmas time. I love being able to relieve that burden on families."

And that isn't just talk. Toys for Tots has indeed brought joy to countless families. But it has also been a source of fond memories for Oliver, one of which had a profound impact that stays with him to this day.

"Back in 2020, we had a family that lost their home and their possessions in a fire," Oliver recalls. "They had temporary housing but nothing else. Through Toys for Tots, we were able to make sure they had a Christmas. They had toys, a tree, decorations, food, everything. It's one of the best we've ever done."

But the hardship isn't always limited to families. The program itself has had its share of challenges, most recently this year.

"When the government shut down, we lost our main source of funding outside of donations," says Oliver. "We were really struggling and weren't sure when it would end."

Oliver didn't let that stop him. True to his values, he found a solution.

"I got together with some of the volunteers, and we kept the program running by funding it ourselves from our own pockets," Oliver remembers. "It was important to us to keep the program running any way we could."

Reaching New Heights

In November 2022, Oliver joined Hiffman as a Building Engineer at the Patton Creek Shopping Center in Hoover, Alabama, where he currently oversees maintenance, landscaping, safety, and security for the 60 businesses that call it home.

But to Oliver, the shopping center is more than a workplace—it's a hub for giving back.

This is his third year leading the Toys for Tots program at Patton Creek—and its growth has been remarkable. The numbers speak for themselves:

- **2023:** 14,840 toys collected
- **2024:** 21,212 toys collected
- **2025:** 25,147 toys collected

That's more than 60,000 donations in just three years. What started in a small space has grown into a large-scale operation supported by more than 200 volunteers, including partnerships with companies like AT&T, Mercedes, Amazon, and Texas Instruments, which donated 100 scientific calculators valued at approximately $80 each. And all under Oliver's leadership.

True to his nature, he's quick to credit others for its success.

"This wouldn't be possible without Hiffman," Oliver says. "They've been incredibly supportive of what we do. It's wonderful to be part of an organization that stands behind its people like that."

Anyone Can Make a Difference

Along with being a devoted husband of 27 years, proud father of four daughters, and loving grandfather to four grandchildren, Oliver sees his work—both professional and volunteer—as part of a bigger picture. And he encourages others to do the same.

"It doesn't cost anything to help somebody," Oliver says. "Nobody that helps someone is useless."

Through his service, leadership, and generosity, Oliver reminds us that making a difference doesn't always require grand gestures—just commitment, compassion, and the willingness to show up.

Visit www.toysfortots.org to find out more about how you can volunteer or donate.

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