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More than 1,000 people turn out for holiday event at River Valley mall

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LANCASTER - Alexis Bell could barely stay in one spot for more than a few minutes.

She had a list to make for Santa, a cookie to decorate with colored icing and some special crafts to make with beads.

Alexis, 3, was decked out in a homemade, red and green elf costume complete with tiny jingling bells. She happily led her mother, Heather, and father, Matt, from station to station at Sunday's Holiday Family Fun Day at River Valley Mall.

"It's just great that they put something like this together for families," Heather said. "(Alexis) is trying everything, she's having fun."

The Holiday Family Fun Day was a joint venture between the *Eagle-Gazette*, Fairfield County Job & Family Services and *momslikeme.com*.

The exhibition offered children and adults the opportunity to create crafts, ornaments and wrapping paper for loved ones, as well as to decorate holiday cookies.

More than a thousand people made it to the event, which took place inside the former Macy's location adjacent to the mall from noon to 6 p.m.

"It's been nice because the parents can just step back and watch the kids enjoy it," said Rich Bowlen, director of Child Protective Services. "It's great to see everyone just kind of slow down for a little bit and enjoy some activities together."

Andy Jacobs watched as his daughter Abby, 6, created a candy cane out of beads and string. She said it only took her a few minutes to create the keepsake.

The day was a special one, Andy said.

"I love to go and watch kids smile," Andy said. "There's nothing better during a stressful holiday than seeing the smiles, and that's what it's really about."

There were more than 60 volunteers helping to keep the eight different craft stations running on Sunday.

Among them was Lancaster Mayor David Smith, who helped children and parents with icing and sprinkles on the cookie assembly line.

"During the holidays it's always nice to see families doing things together," Smith said. "This is an opportunity for everybody to be with their children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews."

Jerry Gray, 63, had grandchildren in attendance on Sunday, but he enjoyed the face-painting and cookie decorating himself for a little bit.

Gray decorated a few treats to be given away by volunteers to any youngster who might have wanted an extra dose of sugar.

"I like doing the cookies," Gray said. "This is such a great event."

More than 30 vendors sold everything from T-shirts to children's books to those who wove through the various stands set up at the event.

Many of the blue balloons that were given to the children at the event were visible throughout River Valley Mall on Sunday afternoon.

"Every kid has had a blast," Bowlen said.

"They've been smiling, they've been happy. We've been hearing things like 'What a nice event,' and 'Are you going to do this next year?' "
