

Alternative gift fair offers new giving idea

■ Theme of second annual event is sharing our good fortune

By Julia Scott
STAFF WRITER

PACIFICA — For years, Pacifica resident Desiree Green bought the same types of Christmas gifts for the adults in her life: sweaters, DVDs, music and electronics.

Last year, she tried something different. She made dona-

tions on their behalf to buy medical supplies for 10 impoverished people, rescue a girl from a brothel in Indonesia and dig a well in a village in Ecuador.

"It really made my whole season, because I didn't really agonize over the bad things in the world. I felt like it had contributed to making things better, and felt free to enjoy my family and the blessings that we have,"

Please see **GIFT**, News 9



JOHN GREEN — Staff

JENNIFER MITCHELL is shown with her husband Mark Rodriguez and their daughters, Lila, 2 and Isabelle, 6, in their Pacifica home on Thursday. Mitchell and the Livability Project are putting on the Alternative Gift Fair featuring 10 charities.

Alternative gift fair shifts holiday focus

► **GIFT**, from News 1

said Green, a mother of two.

Best of all, she did it all at one place: the Alternative Gift Fair in Pacifica. The annual fair, founded by local resident Jennifer Mitchell last December, brings select charities together to offer gifts to people inclined to do good for the world at the same time as doing right by their families and friends.

The event will take place again Saturday and feature 10 local, national and international charities. Sponsored by Pacifica's Livability Project, the gift fair will include entertainment, snacks and a kids' activity corner.

The event drew 200 people last year, according to Mitchell. It is modeled after Maryland's highly successful Takoma Park Alternative Gift Fair, which she heard about on a trip to the East Coast. The concept has spread all over the country in recent years.

Mitchell, a kindergarten teacher, said her decision to or-

ganize the gift fair last year came from a dual instinct to feel good about how she spent her money and promote worthwhile causes during the season of giving. An added environmental benefit: These gifts require no packaging.

"As a parent, there are times when you feel overwhelmed with the commercialism of the holidays, and that need to acquire is really contagious," said Mitchell, who has two young daughters with her husband, Mark.

"I wanted to spread the news that we're fortunate. People can lose sight of that. I want my children to realize that it's our responsibility to take care of the world."

Mitchell still gives her daughters more traditional gifts, like pajamas or toys. But last year she also "bought" each of them a flock of chicks from Heifer International, an organization that donates live barnyard animals to farming families around the world.

This year, Mitchell's 6-year-old daughter Isabelle is saving

money in her piggy bank to send to an organization called "Kids with Cameras" in India.

"Last year, Isabelle kept asking, 'Where are the chicks?' Now I think she gets it," laughed Mitchell.

Those who come to the gift fair Saturday will receive shopping lists for all 10 organizations, with gift items ranging from \$1 to more than \$100. For example, the Milo Foundation, an animal rescue group featured this year, will accept donations of \$5 for a toy for an animal shelter, or \$40 to neuter a dog.

Visitors have the opportunity to talk with charity representatives, read their literature and watch explanatory videos. When a purchase is made, a donation card is sent to the person in whose name it was made with a detailed description of what the money will accomplish.

Other charities chosen to be at the fair this year include La Casa de las Madres, a San Francisco-based battered women's shelter network; the Livability Project, which promotes sus-

tainable lifestyle solutions; Peninsula Habitat for Humanity; Alternative Gifts International; and Mission: Guatemala, which markets fair trade handicrafts.

Mitchell said she had some trouble finding groups to participate in last year's Alternative Gift Fair, due in part to the newness of the idea. This year, she said groups have been approaching her.

Last year's debut event was also a hit with the people who heard about it, according to Mitchell.

"People pulled up chairs and were really talking to organizations. We had people who spent two hours last year to decide who to donate to. That was probably the thing that brought me the closest to tears," she said.

The Alternative Gift Fair takes place from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Ocean Shore School, 411 Oceana Blvd., Pacifica. Visit www.livabilityproject.org/events.