

Surprising Santas help out

BY JACK KNOX, TIMES COLONIST DECEMBER 9, 2009



Sharon Way, left, and Christy Beattie with gifts at the Garth Homer Centre. The centre which serves people with developmental disabilities, are putting together Christmas hampers for those in need

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Here's what the Garth Homer Society's clients, people with developmental disabilities, have been up to lately: playing Santa for needy families, funding a Christmas party at Kiwanis House, buying booties for a lame horse and supplying disabled Africans in an AIDS-ravaged village with pigs, chickens and electricity.

So, what about you?

Me, I tend to carry out any charitable giving with a certain priggishness, a combination of smug piety and sullen resentment. "Isn't this big of me to help out these people who brought misfortune upon themselves?" I say. "Sure hope someone is watching me being selfless."

Contrast that to the attitude at Saanich's Garth Homer centre, a non-profit that provides daytime services -- supported-employment programs, life skills, that sort of thing -- to 126 adults.

Two dozen clients are in the Community Action Team, which collects cans and bottles from 15 sites -- Serious Coffee shops, Pearkes Arena, the Fireside Grill and a few others -- and sends the proceeds to that village in Lesotho. Photos on a bulletin board catalogue some of their accomplishments: \$800 for pigs, \$1,000 for chickens, \$2,400 for care workers and electricity. The CAT team did a presentation to the BCGEU, prompting the union to pitch in for a truck for the village.

"It feels great because we're helping other people in Africa," team member Bailey Lytle said yesterday. "Things that we have, they don't have."

"I like it because it's disabled adults helping disabled adults in another country," said fellow client Tawnya Jones. "It's rewarding. ... I'm very proud to be part of it." She didn't really have to add the last comment; she was bubbling like champagne.

Last week, those in another program paid for specially made boots for Buddy, an ailing horse at Mary's Farm and Sanctuary, one of the places where Garth Homer clients volunteer. They raised the money by making Christmas wreaths.

Participants in yet another program, one for clients with behavioural issues that go beyond their developmental challenges, have taken the money from the centre's pizza and hot dog days and used it to fill Christmas hampers for families at the Cridge Centre. ("Plastic toys, a toy piano, a pedal car," recited Scott Miller, his face contorted in concentration as he rocked in a chair, recalling the previous day's shopping trip to Costco.)

The obvious thing to note is that these are people you might assume to be recipients, not donors, of Christmas spirit, yet they're giving all they've got. It flies in the face of stereotype.

But then, those of us who are relatively healthy and wealthy, who enjoy an arms-length relationship with poverty, with bad luck, often get it wrong when trying to stuff people into convenient pigeonholes. We surf through life on a wave of entitlement, our idea of what need looks like reduced to a caricature. Every year, when it comes time to deliver the goodies for the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, I get smacked in the face by the inconvenient reality that most of those in need are frighteningly ordinary, people like you and me who are just a fall, a stroke, a car crash away from having life turned upside down.

Here's an image that has haunted me for a dozen years: two little girls in pink party dresses, ribbons in their hair, quivering with excitement as they walked into the jam-packed Bay Street Armoury for the annual Mustard Seed Street Church turkey dinner.

Nothing bad happened. No one left hungry. The volunteers were great, as always. The kids were thrilled -- and that's the point: For these two little girls, Christmas dinner meant a paper-plate meal shared with a thousand strangers in a cavernous army drill hall. Which made me think: If they think this is magic, what does the rest of life look like? Kind of makes it hard to retain my sanctimonious buttheadishness when I think of those girls, but somehow I manage to hold on.

But what the heck, better sanctimonious giving than no giving at all. Applications to the Greater Victoria Christmas Bureau, which acts as a clearing house for the Times Colonist Christmas Fund and similar local charities, are up 25 per cent this year. The need is great.

Thank God for people like the clients at the Garth Homer Society.

HOW TO DONATE

- Mail a cheque to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, B.C. V8T 4M2.
- Use your credit card by phoning 250-995-4438.

- Donate online through our partnership with the Queen Alexandra Foundation at www.queenalexandra.org
- The Christmas Bureau can be reached at 250-388-5704.

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