

Distributing holiday cheer

Community Giving Tree helps out the needy

By Kathryn O'Brien
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After assembling racks of warm winter coats, boxes full of stocking stuffers, piles of toys and other gifts, the Community Giving Tree group opened its doors in the Parish Hall at the Second Congregational Church in West Boxford last Wednesday to some 30 social services agencies who were allowed to go "shopping" for their needy clients.

This is the third Holiday Gift Distribution Open House held by the Giving Tree, a community group that has been helping families year round since 2002.

Community Giving Tree got its start running the Toy Fair almost 20 years ago.

"It was the stories we heard from area social workers, nurses and school teachers who came to take the unsold toys that inspired us to recycle other items such as winter coats, baby clothes and baby equipment to low-income families.

"Social workers would relate how great the need was for families living only minutes from our community," explained Leslie Levenson, who leads this dedicated group of volunteers made up of many tri-town residents as well as a few Georgetown and North Andover volunteers.

"We started gathering new holiday gifts, because there was so much interest from area scout groups, businesses, preschools

and individuals who wished to donate items to charities during the holidays," added Levenson.

Noting that this year's distribution was a great success, Levenson said, "We were nervous about how many social workers would come, but we were able to accommodate all 80 professionals (representing about 30 agencies)."

The agencies told Levenson that "the need was great this year," and that the Giving Tree was one of the only charities helping with new holiday gifts this year.

The presents and gifts donated to the Giving Tree — the official collection coordinator — came from numerous groups across the communities of Boxford and Topsfield and beyond.

Daisy groups put together "Friendship Boxes" packed with stocking stuffers, and the Topsfield-Boxford Community Club, which runs the Box-Top Shop in Topsfield, generously donated huge Christmas stockings overflowing with small gifts and toys. A total of 300 coats came from Anton's Cleaners, while places as far away as the Tower School in Marblehead also contributed boxes of goodies for the homeless, abused, jobless and others in need at this time of the year.

Other donations came from the following groups: Boxford, Topsfield, and Middleton Daisy Troops, Curves of Topsfield, Trinity Preschool, Kindercare in North Andover, Second Congre-

gational Church of West Boxford's White Gifts (shared with Emmaus), Peace, Groove, and Happiness Yoga, Parker River Day Care, Smith Family Day Care, ReMax Village Properties, First National Bank of Ipswich-Newburyport and kids who shared their December birthday's by having a Care and Share party.

"Everything is new except the coats," said organizer Christina Eckert, who said that the gently donated garments are cleaned by Anton's, then picked up at their Methuen store by the Giving Tree volunteers.

Social services groups that attended this unique three-hour Open House last week included Catholic Charities, school nurses from Lawrence, the Lawrence YWCA and the Lynn and Salem YMCAs, to name a few.

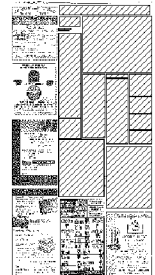
Social service workers were able to choose new toys, coats in adult and children's sizes, children's clothes, toiletries and diapers for their clients.

A proud history

Twenty years ago the founders of the original Toy Fair were Betty Obernesser, Elizabeth Meyer and Sharon Benson, to name a few. All of them were part of the Care Committee at Spofford Pond School.

The Toy Fair is now headed up by Community Giving Tree staff and volunteers including Leslie Levenson, Sue Rubin, Christina Eckert and Martha Maysek.

Betty Obernesser co-founded



the Community Giving Tree along with Leslie Levenson; however, she has moved on from all those activities now.

Although the Holiday Distribution event has grown by leaps and bounds, Levenson stressed that even more businesses and groups

are encouraged to participate in holiday collections in the future.

"We had a couple latecomers who had to be turned away because we didn't have any more donations," said Levenson.

"The social workers were thrilled with the new hats and

mittens, the much-needed toiletries, socks, and underwear," added Levenson. Although toys are great gifts, Levenson stressed that basic necessities are luxuries to the many families served by these agencies.



WICKED LOCAL PHOTOS BY KATHRYN O'BRIEN

Organizing the coats for the social services shopping day at the Second Congregational Church in West Boxford are Sandy McCarthy, left, and Ann Vorwald.



Piling up the gifts in preparation for the Open House are, from left, Lori Fahmer and Sue Rublin, a community outreach worker for the Community Giving Tree.



Leslie Levenson of the Community Giving Tree, right, helps out Michelle Basile from Department of Children and Families at last week's Holiday Distribution Open House.