

## **SANTA'S WORKSHOP: A Unique Comox Valley Charity.**

You may have noticed the sign "SANTA'S WORKSHOP" which appears across the front of an empty store or warehouse each November and December somewhere in Courtenay. Lately, it's been in a warehouse on Fifth St. Do you know who runs Santa's Workshop and what they do there? Perhaps you do, but perhaps not.

Santa's Workshop is a registered charity completely organized and run by Comox Valley volunteers. There are no paid employees or managers. It is operated by a volunteer unpaid Board but all the board members are also very busy worker bees during the two plus months the group is active. This is a unique Comox Valley organization.

### **HOW DID IT GET STARTED?**

SANTA'S WORKSHOP was originally part of an organization started in 1972 by Doris Marlowe and others. The plan was to help low income and social assistance people get off welfare. Unfortunately most of the components of the program had to be abandoned when government funding was withdrawn. Only Santa's Workshop continued and it was conducted out of a garage by Ms. Marlowe and her daughters. In the early years, families received one gift, something used but looking like new. In 1994 the organization became a registered charity, officially named Santa's Workshop. By 2005 Santa's Workshop had 45 volunteers and served 375 families

Space has always been a problem for the organization. Every few years the executive are forced to look for another "empty" space and rental rates continue to climb. At one point the bike repair department had to be at a separate location, fortunately not too far from the main area, and the lunchroom a very important place where a lot of the good times happen.!

### **2013**

Last year, (2013) Santa's Workshop had 98 volunteers working anywhere from a half day a week to full time, ( six hours a day five days a week). We worked in a huge warehouse. We rented it for two months and used every bit of space to wash, clean, repair and organize Christmas gifts and toys for Comox Valley children of families in need. Then when Christmas was over the volunteers pack up all the leftover toys and supplies in large cardboard boxes and put them in a rented storage space until we start all over again.

In 2013, 308 parents came through the warehouse, one at a time by appointment, to select a variety of new and used toys, games, books, bicycles, activity materials, and stuffies for 682 children from babies to 16 years old. 202 bicycles completely refurbished and in good running order were given out to every child who needed one.

Also, the workshop was open for two days to 33 grandparents who were unable to provide gifts for 100 grandchildren. Can you imagine the emotional pain of being unable to afford to buy a gift for a beloved grandchild?

### **HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN ABOUT SANTA'S WORKSHOP'?**

**Santa's Workshop has a website, "santasworkshopcomoxvalley.com". The phone number active in November and December is 250-897-1994.** Notices are put in Thrift stores, churches and other places where

families that need help are likely to see them. Ads are also put in the local papers and on radio. Service clubs are notified and word of mouth is a big help in spreading the word.

Parents phone and make an appointment to come in and view what we have in the warehouse. Appointments are scheduled for every twenty minutes through three weeks of December. By that time volunteers have pretty well completed the cleaning, refurbishing and repairing of all the used donations and generally they keep out of the way while parents are shopping. We are very aware of the fact that privacy is important, as many parents feel embarrassed, to find themselves in a situation where they can't provide toys for their children at Christmas. The shoppers follow a circular route through the warehouse accompanied by an Elf and a shopping cart. All of the gifts are arranged on tables and shelving according to age. Each parent can choose a used package, one "new" package, a bicycle, books and puzzles. They can also choose from an assortment of craft materials, stuffies, dolls and dress up costumes for each child in their family. We have a selection of large items, such as doll houses, kitchens, snow boards and a variety of large toys and games all donated by Comox Valley Citizens. All ready to be enjoyed again, by some lucky child.

Santa's Workshop provides toys to boys and girls in these age groups: 0-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-10 for new and used items and then 11-13, 14-16 for new items. Older children are the hardest to provide for. Very few used donations come in for older children so we buy a lot of new items with money that is donated to us by individuals from our community. People in Comox Valley are very generous.

Donated toys that are not gift quality but still usable are put in an "as is" section that can be taken home by any parent who wants them.

## **WHAT DO VOLUNTEERS DO?**

Volunteers begin working the first Monday in November. For new people there is an orientation time or they are mentored. All the used toys require careful cleaning, washing and refurbishing to be put into as close to new condition as possible... Each volunteer has a specific work area and that is where he or she will stay for the two months. In November large boxes are covered with Christmas wrap and distributed to stores around the Comox Valley to receive donations. The working areas are set up in the warehouse and the Reception area is set up with the computer and the phone ready for requests. There is a large area for bicycles, an area for washing and drying and shelves and tables for each age group. There are separate areas for cleaning and setting out story books, puzzles, activity materials, stuffies, games, electronics and dolls. All the books are carefully gone through page by page to remove marks and make sure all pages are intact. The covers are wiped down and cleaned. The puzzles are checked to be sure all the pieces are there. Some people take them home to work on. I've noticed the receptionist working on the little people's puzzles when the phone isn't busy.

## **BIKES**

A large part of the warehouse is taken up by the bike repair shop. The bikes are checked over and any that are not suitable for gifts are taken apart and the parts are sorted and stored in boxes ready to be reused. Last year we gave out 202 bikes. Each bike is stripped down and cleaned thoroughly. All parts are checked and repaired or replaced, greased and oiled. Even new bikes are checked. Because of having a supply of bike parts the cost to refurbish a used bike is approximately five dollars but it takes a lot of time to do it properly.

## **ELECTRONICS**

Battery operated toys and electronics have their own small area. First numerous kinds and sizes of batteries and other materials are purchased, sorted and stored. As used toys come in they are checked to see whether they run or not and what needs to be done to make them work. They are tagged to say what batteries are required. Then they are sent off for cleaning, and sent to the proper age group. Toys that can't be made to run are sent to the "as is" section

## **NEW TOYS**

Every child who is on our list receives a bag of "brand new toys". These toys are either donated by local businesses and individual donors or bought by us with donated money. When we buy toys with the money we receive we spend all of it locally. We are committed to supporting the stores and businesses that support us. I work with new toys. In our area we have separate shelves for each age group, boys and girls. As the toys come in they are placed accordingly on the correct shelf. Some days when we get to work we find the boxes where the donations are put; overflowing with new toys and games. Some of the large stores send us huge loads of new toys. A couple of days we had to literally work our way through the toys on the floor to get back into our work area, and nearly all of them go. Those that don't get chosen this year are packed up again to be used the following November.

As the toys are sorted we start to fill our packages. Each age group has a different cash value in their gift package. Older children's gifts might include toques, gloves, sleeping bags, snuggle blankets, swimming towels, bathrobes, jewelry and makeup. We also get coupons for the movie theatre and the swimming pool. Once we add the items to reach the required total everything is placed in a large plastic bag so the contents can be seen by the parents coming to choose for their children. When the bundle is sealed it is also labeled with a tag for batteries if they are required.

## **DECEMBER**

In December the parents begin coming in and the areas have been rearranged. New areas have been created in the warehouse where all the toys are laid out in their age groups and categories. Toys in packages are put out twelve at a time for each age group, boys and girls. So parents can choose packages for each of their children. Batteries are placed in baskets by each shelf so they can be added if the package containing toys needs them.

## **ELVES**

An Elf is a special volunteer job for December shopping. Elves have an orientation session if they are new to the job in order to find out exactly how to conduct themselves when they show parents around to choose their gifts. (E.g. what is available, how many, "as is" items, and anything else parents might want to know.) The elves are a great help in loading and handling the shopping carts which are usually overloaded.

## **DONATIONS**

Santa's Workshop has survived for the past 42 years entirely on local donations. This includes the volunteer hours to make it all happen, money to rent space, both working space, storage space, and new toys as required. Large numbers of individuals, families and groups donate a variety of new and used toys. Everything is gratefully received. Sometimes children come to visit in November to personally donate Birthday money or

toys they have outgrown. It's impossible for me to name all the individuals and groups who have contributed so generously for so many years. Each gets a letter of thanks from our organization but otherwise they remain anonymous

People drop in or phone in to make donations. We have calls from some of the offices in town who regularly ask what we need. Some donate money; some find it more fun to personally shop for children. One day last year a family came in with a huge parcel containing over three hundred dollars worth of new toys. What a wonderful way to share the Christmas Spirit! A young fellow came in and asked what we needed. We suggested board games and remote control cars for teens. A few days later we came in to find half a dozen of each had been dropped off. Same fellow? I don't know. It was anonymous. One afternoon two retired women came in with five large boxes filled with completely refurbished dolls, all beautifully dressed in new handmade clothes that they had made during many hours of leisure time. Again, something that makes one's heart feel so warm.

It is critical for us to receive donations as early as possible. Many people don't begin to think about Christmas until they flip to the December page on the calendar. By then we have been up and at it for a month and parents are booked and ready to see what we have in store for them. When donations come in late we continue to sort them and pack them. If we don't need them to replenish the things on the shelves, we pack them into our large labeled cardboard boxes for storage, to provide our early November supplies when we start up again.

### **WHY DO WE DO THIS YEAR AFTER YEAR?**

Believe it or not, volunteering and doing something good for someone else, even if you never actually meet the recipient makes a person feel blessed all over. We don't usually meet the parents who come in, we keep out of their way to ensure their privacy and dignity but just knowing that the effort we have put in has made someone's life happier, easier and brighter is an unbelievable reward. That's why the volunteers continue year after year doing what they do, anonymously. The rewards are intangible but they are very, very real and make our own lives brighter. On a grey, rainy November day there is nothing better than wading through the muddy driveway to that warehouse and spending several hours working hard to make someone else's Christmas a little more enjoyable...and we all have fun and enjoy ourselves and each other as we do it.

Joyce has been a volunteer at Santa's Workshop for 27 years. I asked her what makes her keep coming back and she says it's because of the great feeling you get when you know you are helping and you imagine some child's joy on Christmas morning. Also there are memorable moments especially when you work as an Elf and meet the parents. Joyce has never forgotten an incident years ago when A father came in with his 16 yr. old daughter, the care giver for three small siblings. After the children's needs were met the father wanted something for the 16 yr. old. She loved dolls. Joyce knew just the perfect gift, a very special porcelain clown doll, holding a smaller clown doll, holding a smaller clown doll, that had been donated ,something truly unique. Joyce asked for permission to give the doll to Dad as it was quite valuable. He was so overcome he was in tears as was Joyce. These kinds of things don't happen very often and you never forget. Joyce tells me that one of the things she has done for a number of years is visit garage sales during the summer months looking for good used toys for Santa's Workshop. She loves what she does.

Theo has been a Santa's Workshop volunteer for many years and for several of those she coordinated the program. Her most poignant memory was being an Elf and having a mother (with three young children at home) arrive at the workshop and break down in tears, having just been told she was fired and having very limited resources right before Christmas. Theo comforted the poor woman as best she could and escorted her around the workshop choosing toys for her children and at least providing a small bright light on a very dark day.

Both Theo and Joyce agree that working at Santa's workshop helps make the gloomy winter days go by more quickly. It's nice to get up in the morning and realize that you have something worthwhile to do with people that you like. Getting together and sharing lunch and laughter and having a bit of a joke with each other makes the dark days of winter much more pleasant.

These days Eileen and Donna coordinate the program and volunteers. Donna has been involved with the workshop for about 10 years. Eileen became involved when she first moved here and was looking for something to get her out into the community. She saw an ad in the newspaper and answered it and has been a volunteer for the past 8 years. Eileen and Donna put in many, many hours during the two active months. In last year's building there was a flight of stairs between reception and the warehouse and both Donna and Eileen make many trips a day up and down keeping everything running smoothly. Both say that although it's really a lot of work it is so worthwhile and personally rewarding that although you go home dog tired you still feel really good inside. ***That's the reason for Santa's Workshop!***