

Get into the spirit of giving with Neighbourhood Network's gift drive



By Brock Weir

Christmas is so often about the joy of giving, whether you're giving a small token to a friend or loved one, or donating an hour or two of your valuable time. For many families, giving is just out of reach, but you can help them achieve that goal through Neighbourhood Network's Holiday Gift Drive.

Running now through December 19, Neighbourhood Network is collecting and distributing holiday gifts and donations to charitable organizations, including their 350 partners throughout York Region.

The Holiday Gift Drive program ensures gift donations go right into the hands of those who need it most, through lists compiled by these community partners, including Big Brothers Big Sisters of York and the Children's Aid Society of York Region.

As gifts ? and wish lists ? continue to roll in, however, there is one overriding trend riding to the top, says Maggie Pelyvas, who is spearheading the drive.

?Every single organization is looking for gift cards, whether it is Shopper's Drug Mart gift cards, grocery stores or gas stations,? she says. ?Cineplex is also a huge one. It's a lovely outing for the whole family to go and see a movie and great for everyone involved.

Gift cards are nice because you can give them to families and they can do their own shopping for their kids. It gives them independence, too. Some people shy away from the fact they need something, so when you can give them half of the gift they can do the rest. I think it is a great feeling for the parents that don't necessarily have the cash but want to do the shopping themselves.?

The second-most trending items on the wish lists include toiletries, which are often in high demand in shelters.

One item which continues to appear on the lists which Ms. Pelyvas says she finds surprising are student backpacks. This is particularly prevalent on the wish lists compiled by Big Brothers Big Sisters of York from their clients.

?We get wish lists from our partners, put their needs in a database, keep track of it and everyone has their own separate box,? says Ms. Pelyvas. ?I let them know when it is ready for pickup and the family is ready to have all their gifts put under the tree.?

This year, however, new, emerging and growing partnerships are beginning to form.

In years past, regardless of the organization spearheading a holiday drive, one demographic that is always in need, but all-too-often unaddressed is teen boys. People often know just what to donate to put smiles on the faces of little girls and little boys that would otherwise go without this season, but whether the teen boys are looking for movie passes, sports equipment, or even gift cards to local restaurants near their respective schools, sometimes checking them off the list can be something of a challenge.

Enter the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.

The charity, which recently relocated to Aurora, has provided Neighbourhood Network with a whopping 10,000 ?Nerd Blocks,? which are boxes of small gifts tailor-made for teen boys, including comic books, games, and some more practical items.

?We have done four trips back and forth to their warehouse and have found a home for 450 of these boxes,? says Ms. Pelyvas. ?It was fun for me as an adult to open each unique box myself so I can imagine a lot of boys will be happy to find that under their tree.?

The partnership between Neighbourhood Network and Big Brothers Big Sisters continues to grow as well with both organizations

comparing their lists of what each has received, and trading back and forth to make sure that as many needs as possible are met. But it is not a drive exclusively between Neighbourhood Network and its partner organizations. Assistance from the general public is needed now more than ever ? and no gift will go unused.

?We accept everything new and used,? says Ms. Pelyvas. ?If we can't use the used items, we donate them elsewhere but sometimes a little cleaning goes a long way and we can end up giving to somebody and find a home for it. Sometimes we do give gifts to the parents depending on certain circumstances, whether it is a single parent, and they deserve some Christmas cheer too. Even if they are not buying something for kids, they are more than welcome to buy stuff for adults and that can be socks or slippers, something comfortable and cozy for them in the winter season. Coffee or tea is one of the recommended donations for those parents and family members.

?We also are helping animals. There is a family who has a pet rabbit and a dog. I reached out to Pet Valu for donations and they were like, ?just let us know what you need and what this animal is and we will give them toys and food, and whatever you need.' The requests that come in may sound strange but it doesn't surprise me because I guess every person in that family, even if it is an animal, deserves a comfy bed to sleep in.?

For more information on the Neighbourhood Network Holiday Gift Drive, visit www.neighbourhoodnetwork.org. Donations of any kind are being accepted at Neighbourhood Network's Aurora office at 14998 Yonge Street, and in King Township at the King City Fire Station at 2045 King Road.