

PLAIN TALK

Christmas Magic still brings joy to Suffolk County

Christmas in New York City touches one's heart and soul. No matter what the news headlines, walking the streets of Manhattan at Christmastime helps to ignite the holiday spirit. It is almost impossible to not be infected by the holiday cheer in the air.

This past year has been one of challenge and great concern. As a nation, we hover on the verge of war as we battle international terrorism. Scandal, corruption and economic woes have continuously plagued us throughout the year. Many people we respected and looked up to have fallen from grace.

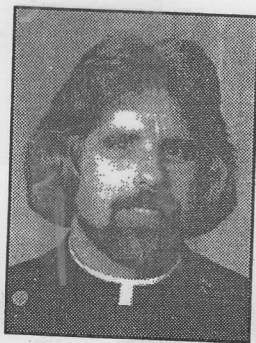
Despite that bleak and at times despairing picture, there are still countless men and women among us who are true beacons of hope. On a daily basis, they remind us of the true reason for the season.

Almost 25 years ago the *New York Times* Long Island section featured an article about a clergy person advocating on behalf of a young person caught in a child custody battle between his parents. The young person in this case was clearly being victimized by the system. The priest was challenging the system.

A young attorney from Port Jefferson wrote the priest and offered to assist him. He also offered to represent any young people in crisis who could not afford legal representation. That letter began a connection that has endured and grown over these past 25 years.

During these years, I have learned much from this attorney. He is one of the most generous people I know. He has and does give of his time, talent and treasure without ever expecting anything in return. He redefines what it means to give from the heart.

Almost 25 years ago, when his six children were still in elementary and middle school, he expressed his concern that his children were not learning the true meaning of Christmas. He and his wife worked hard so they could raise their family in a safe, respectful community. Sometimes those who grow up in a privileged and exceptionally blessed environment lose sight of what is really important.



BY THE
REVEREND FRANCIS
PIZZARELLI, S.S.M.

Too often some young people don't appreciate the opportunities they receive because of the hard work and sacrifice of their parents. They look at so much of what they have received as entitlements, not as gifts or blessings. That attitude unfortunately breeds selfishness and at times social indifference.

The successful father of six was determined that his children would not become selfish or socially indifferent. Eighteen years ago, Mr. J gathered his kids right after Thanksgiving and said "this Christmas we are going to share the meaning of the season with those who don't have the same opportunities we have."

That holiday he withdrew a few hundred dollars from the bank and took his older children Christmas shopping for a handful of poor and underprivileged children, most of whom his law firm represented without charge.

Once the packages were purchased and wrapped, he told his kids that on Christmas Eve he would dress up as Santa and he wanted them to be his elves. On that memorable Christmas Eve, four of his six children followed their father (who is a big, stocky football player) dressed as Santa as they made half a dozen stops. That night they saw the transformation on the faces of dozens of little kids who probably weren't going to have Christmas that year.

His children were overwhelmed. They learned the true reason for the season that Christmas Eve. On that wonderful night, Christmas Magic was born. In the early years that followed, Port Jefferson's Santa Claus and his growing army of elves blessed more and more poor and disadvantaged children on Christmas. As Mr. J's children grew older, they asked their father if their friends could share in this positive experience.

Today, almost 25 years later, hundreds of children around Suffolk County have been blessed with Christmas. Four out of Mr. J's six children are grown. No matter where they are, they come home for Christmas to continue the tradition their father began with them.

New each holiday season, Christmas Magic involves hundreds of high school and college students. They shop, wrap and most importantly, they deliver their gifts and share with the recipients of their kindness. The joy and hope that is shared clearly pierces the darkness that hovers over us.

The miracle of Christmas Magic is that the efforts of one father to teach his children the true meaning of Christmas has grown to hundreds of caring and giving people sharing the reason for the season with so many, young and old alike who have fallen on hard times.

This year I heard countless stories of families who are struggling. These are hard times for so many. Our shelters are overflowing. Every day we hear of more and more people being displaced from their homes. There are endless stories of children living in welfare motels without stability. There are a growing number of working poor families trying to find safe, respectful places to live.

In the midst of all of this suffering and struggle, it is refreshing to know the Mr. J's of the world who truly are beacons of hope in a world that often hovers on the edge of despair. They practice what they preach, with no expectation of acknowledgement or adulation. The hierarchy and religious leadership should learn a powerful lesson from their example.

As a community, we have been blessed by Christmas Magic and the miracle of so many hands and hearts who give of their time, talent and treasure without condition or expectation.

Thank you Christmas Magic for teaching a part of us the reason for the season.