

Magic act of charity, love

■ **LI organization** making Christmas wishes a reality

■ **Giving out gifts** for kids in shelters and orphanages

BY BOB HERZOG

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Every year around this time, the letters pour in. Often, the tears pour out. Take this one, from a 9-year-old named Claire. "My mom always takes care of me, but this year she can't because we find ourselves in a homeless shelter. Can you make my dreams come true?"

Dave Kotowski began choking up as he read the letter, one of nearly 7,000 that an organization known as Christmas Magic receives every year from children in shelters and orphanages. The brainchild of Charlie Russo, still one of several Santa Clauses that fulfill dreams all over Long Island, Christmas Magic is a charity that draws heavily from high school sports programs in Nassau and Suffolk.

Kotowski, the girls lacrosse coach at Cold Spring Harbor and another Santa, said his teams — including the town's travel squads — have been involved for four years. "Four years ago, my daughter Kate [now 11] was with me and as we drove home after giving out the gifts, she said, 'I really think I know who Santa Claus is. It's Mr. Russo. Look what he's done for all these kids.'

"My lacrosse players did everything this year — shopping, wrapping and delivering. We filled up a big box truck to the brim with gifts. It's an unbelievable experience."

In Bay Shore, longtime softball coach Jim McGowan has been part of Christmas Magic since its inception 25 years ago, involving his varsity softball team and many other Bay Shore

high school students in his Peer Support Help organization. "Those letters are really powerful stuff," said McGowan, whose groups wrapped and delivered nearly 500 gifts. "Our kids dressed as elves, snowflakes, reindeer. It magnifies what the Christmas spirit is all about. They came back beaming and talking about how appreciative the little kids were."

Most of the letter-writers aren't asking for iPods, but clothes. One 17-year-old, who attends high school even though he is in a homeless shelter, asked for a laptop "because he was the only kid in school without a computer," Kotowski said.

Plainedge athletic director Jamie LaBelle, also one of Russo's Santas, instituted a new wrinkle this year. He pulled together 38 athletic directors in Nassau and Suffolk. "When you read the lists and what they're asking for — shoes, coats — it's very emotional," LaBelle said. "This year we delivered the gifts to a small elementary school in Brentwood . . . To see those kids' faces, it's a gift for us."

The gift-giving is expanding. Lawyer Chris Bragoli, who started the Frank Carl Bragoli Memorial scholarship fund 27 years ago to honor his brother, a Half Hollow East soccer player who died in an auto accident, and fellow lawyer Ray Suris are now involved in several charities, including Christmas Magic.

"That one really touched us," Suris said. Bragoli said he gets the staff involved. "We had a wrapping party in our office this week," he said. "To see the faces of those kids is so satisfying."

Russo describes a scene that moves him to this day. "This big hulk of a football player was down on the floor playing with this homeless kid who had just opened his toy," Russo said. "By the end of the night, he was reduced to a puddle of tears."

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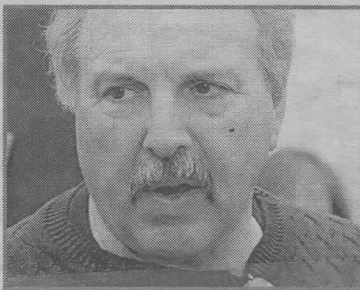
NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2009



Volunteer Cobi Rose, 13, of Islip, hands out juice in Sayville.

PHOTO BY JAMES CARBONE

Charles Russo
59, HAUPPAUGE LAWYER



For a quarter-century, homeless Long Island families have gotten help and gifts for their children at the holidays thanks to a massive volunteer effort led by attorney Charles Russo.

This year, the need is staggering — unlike anything Russo has seen before. For the first time, he said, volunteers who in the past gathered gifts for others are themselves asking for presents to put under the tree.

“It’s tough out there,” said Russo. “We are overwhelmed.”

Russo’s nonprofit, Holiday Magic, starts preparing in September.

By Thanksgiving, Christmas lists from thousands of Long Island kids living in shelters begin arriving. He said his organization expects to provide as many as 7,000 children gifts this season.

The organization relies on more than 500 businesses, amateur sports teams and individuals who donate money and time to make sure the wish lists are filled. In the two days before Christmas, Russo opens up his command center to any and all in need of gifts. This year, the operation is working from vacant office space in a Hauppauge building where Russo has his law practice.

Yesterday, Russo directed the action under bright ornaments dangling from the ceiling. In side rooms black plastic bags were piled, stuffed with gifts. Families, bundled against the cold, came in to browse and gather, as volunteers selected bags for delivery.

— WILL VAN SANT