

Spreading A Little 'Christmas Magic'

By Laura Stiles

Holidays are hectic with families running around gift shopping, preparing extra-special feasts and searching for elusive quality time. Among all these extra responsibilities the true meaning of Christmas sometimes gets overlooked.

Not so for attorney Charlie Russo, who fulfills Christmas dreams for the disadvantaged. Fourteen years ago, when one of his sons began questioning the existence of Santa, Russo decided the time was ripe to involve him in community service.

"We began bringing toys to about 20 children in one shelter that year. Each year since then the idea has blossomed. In 1990, we established 'Christmas Magic' as a not-for-profit organization, and currently we work

with over 20 shelters and groups," explained Russo.

A Port Jefferson resident, he earned his law degree while he lived in the Melville House and now is a partner in the Hauppauge law firm he founded.

Among some of the behind-the-scenes activities Christmas Magic volunteers do are shopping, wrapping, labeling, assembling toys, coordinating, delivering, decorating and making phone calls. At this time of year, Russo's office changes into a local version of Santa's workshop with bikes and other presents strewn around. Not a spotlight seeker, he quickly diverts attention from his efforts and compliments his Head Elf, Elyse Craft, and all the other helpers for their enthusiasm and dedication.

"Christmas Magic does not supply gener-

ic gifts," said Fred Amodeo, a teacher for 18 years and currently at Port Jefferson Station's Comsewogue High School. He is an adviser to the Bring Unity To Youth ("BUTY") group whose students volunteer as elves for Christmas Magic.

"The children in the programs actually write specific letters to Santa which are then answered by elves who introduce themselves and say how anxious they are to meet them on Christmas Eve," he said. "After that the helpers specifically shop for the children's requests. If a little girl wants a Barbie doll, she will often get a Barbie, a Ken, a Barbie house and accessories. If a boy requests a specific board game, he will get several others also.

"This is a great program. One of the best things about it is that it is Charlie's dream. It is truly contagious. Charlie is so good at what he does, he makes it easy to say 'yes' to his requests. Charlie gets kids involved in this program year round. Christmas Magic recently constructed a much-needed playground for a local shelter," said Amodeo.

The program, he noted, is a good educational tool. "Education is not just about budgets and books. It is about direct contact. These students see the kids and witness their expressions on Christmas and it touches them and makes a lasting impression," Amodeo said.

Christmas Magic is funded solely by private donations and word of mouth. With minuscule overhead costs, all donations are earmarked strictly towards gifts. This year, it is anticipated Christmas Magic will touch over 3,000 children and brighten their holidays. A

'Christmas Magic'

former football player, Russo dons his Santa suit and hands out the presents to the gleeful children along with tidbits about the children he gleaned earlier from the staff at the shelters.

For more information about the Christmas Magic project please call 265-7200.