

Joy through toys

BY BARBARA DONLON

For the last 29 years, Christmas has been getting a lot brighter for children in shelters thanks to the not-for-profit organization Christmas Magic, which delivers presents to area shelters each year.

Charlie Russo, a lawyer from Port Jefferson, said he started the organization in 1985 with the intention of giving gifts to as many families as he could. At that time, he was able to provide 26 kids with gifts. But last year, the organization provided more than 10,800 kids with gifts.

"The magic part came not from receiving, but giving," Russo said.

His office building in Hauppauge was dubbed the "North Pole," with three rooms filled with hundreds of toys waiting to be wrapped and handed out to kids across Long Island. Santa — played by Russo and a few other volunteers — delivers the toys to each kid from Dec. 3 to Christmas Eve.

This year, the organization will have one special volunteer: wrestler Mick Foley, who said he wanted to help out and dress as Santa.

The needy kids usually write their wishlists to Santa and they are sent to the "North Pole."

"We always try to match kids' wishes, so when they open up [their gifts] there's this belief and hope that there is a better day ahead," Russo said.

The things kids ask for can include anything from a laptop to a coat, a mattress or a popular toy. Parents sometimes request diapers for a baby. The volunteers serve a large range of age groups, from newborns to teens. They have even helped put a few kids through college.

Christmas Magic is able to make children's dreams come true thanks to hundreds of "elves" who volunteer and donations from people all over, Russo said. Empire National Bank is also a big help to Christmas Magic, as they put out toy donation boxes in all of their branches.

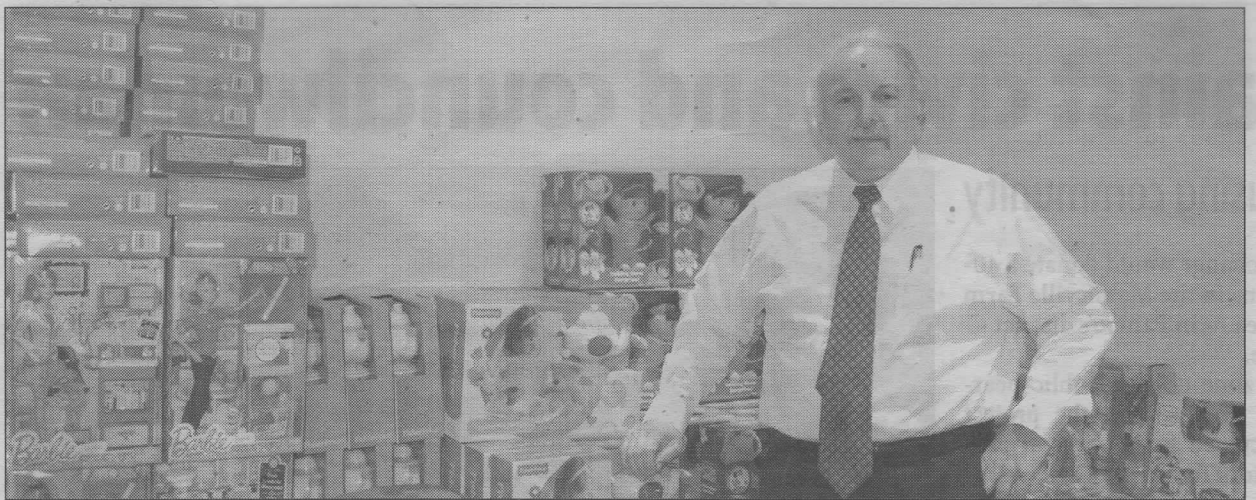
Students from Mount Sinai High School's Students Against Destructive Decisions club helped out this year, using \$6,000 from a recent fundraiser to purchase gifts.

Earlier this month, the students and club advisors, John Wilson and John McHugh, took the kids' wishlists and went shopping. Students were tasked with shopping for two children each and had \$100 to spend on each recipient.

On Dec. 10, the students transformed the high school cafeteria into the North Pole, treated the children and their families to dinner and invited Santa Claus to help them deliver the presents. Children did arts and crafts while costumed characters such as Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer and Frosty the snowman greeted them.

Jenn Partridge, a Port Jefferson Station resident, attended the event with her two daughters, Skyelah Williams, 12, and Starlah Williams, 8, who couldn't have been more excited about seeing Santa.

Partridge has attended the event for eight years and called it a blessing for her family.



Photos by Barbara Donlon

Above, a mountain of toys awaits at the "North Pole," before Charlie Russo helps distribute them. Below, Skyelah and Starlah Williams pose with Santa Claus after receiving their presents at Mount Sinai High School's Christmas magic event.