

# Lawyer Works 'Christmas Magic'

*Hundreds of Volunteers Assist in Distributing Gifts to 5,000 Children*

BY PAT ROGERS

HAUPPAUGE — Charles Russo is making his list — of 5,000 — and checking it twice. As the founder of the 10-year-old nonprofit Christmas Magic, which delivers up to 25,000 gifts to some 5,000 kids in Suffolk County each year, he had just a few details to wrap up this holiday season.

Mr. Russo, an attorney in Hauppauge, receives thousands of Santa letters from children living in homeless shelters or impoverished homes. He coordinates the solicitation of letters through about 20 other nonprofits that provide children's services in Suffolk County.

After he receives the letters, Mr. Russo and his team of elves, who number in the hundreds, give children exactly what they ask for in their letters. He even wears a Santa suit while doing so.

"The point of Christmas Magic is to give the children a moment of hope," Mr. Russo explained on the way to delivering gifts to pre-schoolers in Brentwood. "There's nothing like the moment when they open the present and see the gift they asked Santa for."

After the letters begin arriving in November, Christmas Magic volunteers go shopping for requested items. They gift-wrap them and then drop them off at the Mr. Russo's law office of Russo, Fox & Karl. Donations come largely through a word-of-mouth network and a recently aired Cablevision spot.

Opaque plastic bags containing brightly-colored wrapped gifts, labeled with a child's name or the word, "Extra," for any child who may have slipped through the cracks, are a common sight this time of year at the law firm, which focuses on nonprofit corporation law and criminal work.

The entire office of the Russo firm helps make the magic work, including his law partners, Terry Karl, who is one of the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAT ROGERS

**HO HO HO** — Attorney Charles Russo, above, plays Santa and gives a gift to Iisia Conde while her mother, Abby Bonilla, and friend, Joslin Jemienes, look on at Even Start's Christmas Party at St. Luke's Roman Catholic Church in Brentwood on Dec. 19. At left, Christina Rayfield, a former foster child who has since been adopted, examines her gift, also courtesy of Christmas Magic Inc., at the Suffolk County Social Services party held at the Huntington Townhouse on Dec. 5.



group's founders, and Kevin Fox. Mr. Russo's paralegal, Elyse Galen, is the organization's director.

This year, Christmas Magic rented a trailer and placed it in the parking lot to help store the tens of thousands of gifts given to Suffolk County's needy children.

Since Russo, Fox & Karl has been a vir-

tual North Pole for the past six years, Mr. Russo said that most of his clients are understanding when confronted with stacks of Christmas presents on their way to consulting with the firm's attorneys.

"It's probably the worse time of year to be doing this, from a legal standpoint," he said. "Everyone needs things done before the end of the year, for taxes or other reasons."

Even so, he said the holiday clutter has its benefits. "I think seeing the presents in the office helps bring people out of their problems."

As the holidays approach, it is not

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uncommon for Mr. Russo to don his Santa suit for three parties a day and the occasional stop at someone's house. Depending on the number of children expected, sometimes two or three volunteers step out with Santa and other times an entire high school football team may turn out.

Reluctant to be interviewed and to cast the spotlight on himself, Mr. Russo explained that a recent three-second spot on Cablevision increased the number of children served by his "good deed" by over 1,000. And each child receives between three to seven gifts, depending on the items on their lists. Gifts range from Barbie Dolls and toy trucks to bicycles and computers. Clothes are usually purchased for the children as well.

"You want publicity in the hope that people will turn out to help or to donate," he said. "But it also caused the number of people contacting us, wanting help, to skyrocket."

### Wish Lists

People like an 18-year-old Wyandanch resident, Christopher, who wrote in his letter to Santa that he had accomplished things that would make Santa proud. Like graduating third in his high school class and achieving a 3.1 average his first semester at St. John's University.

However, tragedy struck his life. His mother, whom he called his best friend, died last summer from asthma. Now, Christopher is raising his six siblings, attending school and working at a fast-food restaurant. His Christmas wish was for a reliable car to get back and forth to school and to "take the kids where they need to go." He promised to be "very grateful" and "stay on the straight and narrow."

Or the 7-year-old, Roxanna, who wrote that she does not believe in Santa Claus. She said that she and her six-member family were "poor people." She wrote that she usually makes the honor roll and hopes for a better life when she grows up. She asked for a computer, but said she understood if that was not possible. She also wished for a telephone, but wrote that the family could not afford one.

Hauppauge attorney Steven R. Zimmer of Zimmer & Mazzel, whose office is located in the same building as Russo, Fox & Karl, said that he has volunteered with Christmas Magic since its inception. This year, his three children shopped, wrapped and delivered

presents with him.

"It really gives you perspective when you show up to a child's house and the mother has to go into the next room to get a light bulb, so they can see the gifts," Mr. Zimmer said. "Or when my kids saw six people living in a space the size of our living room. Being involved lets you step outside of your world and see how lucky you are."

At the Suffolk County Social Services Christmas party for their foster care families at the Huntington Town House catering hall a few weeks ago, spokesperson Dennis Nowak pointed to some of the seemingly endless stream of about 550 children who had just received gifts from Santa. Mr. Nowak said that currently about 850 children are in foster care in Suffolk County.

"Every child gets a gift, whether they are a foster care child or a natural-born child of the foster parents," Mr. Nowak said. "It makes a huge difference to everyone."

Mr. Russo said that when he first fulfilled the wishes from five letters written to Santa in 1985, he never envisioned Christmas Magic taking on the large proportions it has today. And after seeing his own children interact with children in shelters, he decided to form the nonprofit in 1990, along with Mr. Karl.

Mr. Russo always has had a soft spot for helping others. In 1980, he founded Hope

House Ministries of Port Jefferson, which provides services for underprivileged youths. He currently serves as the chairman of the board of directors.

And while attending Hofstra University School of Law in the 1970s, Mr. Russo was a resident assistant director of Melville House, where he lived with 35 homeless boys. It was there that the idea of Christmas Magic was born.

He said that while gifts were dropped off every year, it never seemed a special experience. "The boys would come down, poke around at the pile and take a game or something," he said. "But what they really wanted was never there. That's why I have the kids write down exactly what they want and give it to them. It's like someone is listening to them and what they want really matters. It's a powerful experience for everyone."

Between juggling his law practice and the demands of Christmas Magic, Mr. Russo carves out time for his six children and wife, Carol. Mr. Russo is also a co-owner of the National Lacrosse team, the New York Saints, whose home base is Nassau Coliseum. He also is a sitting judge in the Village of Belle Terre.

Mr. Russo plans on creating a pool of sporting event tickets to give to children who live in shelters to attend with a counselor. "There's a lot of little things that you can do to make these kids' lives a little brighter," he said. "It doesn't have to end at Christmas."





# They Have Gift of Giving

Volunteers spread Christmas joy to needy kids on LI

By Gregg Sarra  
STAFF WRITER

The anticipation was making him so anxious. Juan Garcia sat quietly in a corner of the Knights of Columbus hall in Bay Shore one night earlier this month and patiently waited for his name to be called. The 8-year-old, who came from Bay Shore's Rainbow Outreach, stared across the hall at Santa Claus in his red and white suit handing out gift after gift to all the jubilant children who were called up to see him.

And then it happened.

Holding a letter in his left hand, old St. Nick belted out the words Garcia had been waiting for — "Juan Garcia."

Without hesitation, and so quickly it was as if his feet didn't touch the floor, Garcia was sitting atop Santa's lap and smiling from ear to ear.

This is what Christmas Magic is all about — the joy of giving. Garcia opened his gift, a WWF championship wrestling belt, and leapt from Santa's lap exclaiming, "I am the champion. Yes, I am."

Garcia was one of 360 children at the K of C as Christmas Magic wound its way through Suffolk County, meeting the requests of needy children with the help of local high school athletes and coaches. This night the kids came from St. Patrick's Church Outreach Center, Suburban Housing and Rainbow Outreach.

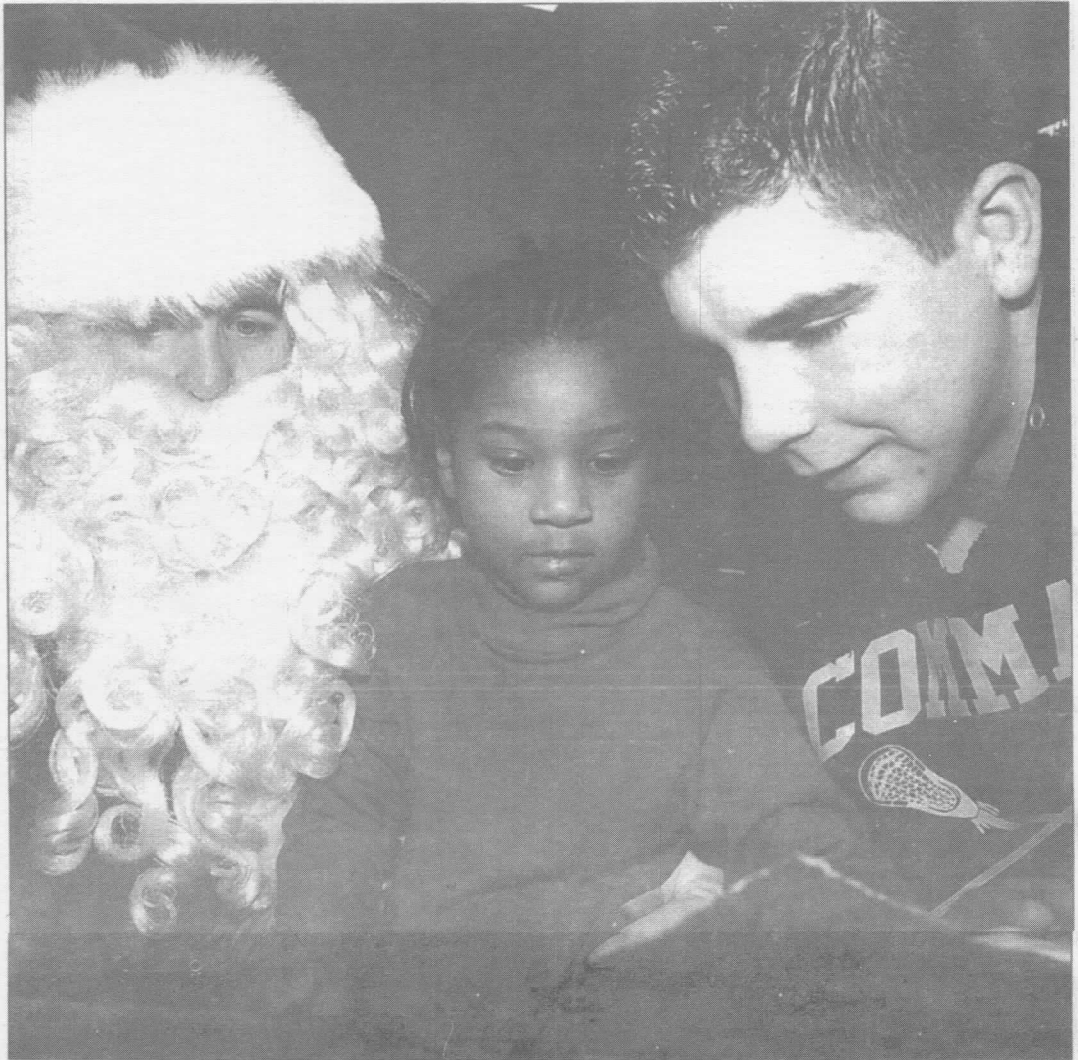
"He [Garcia] was such a cute kid," said Charlie Russo, who founded Christmas Magic 15 years ago. "You could see the excitement just building in these kids when they wait for their name to be called. And when they come up and sit on our lap, their stories are heartbreaking. It's such a warm feeling to see them smile. It's great."

The smiles started at the Huntington Townhouse on Dec. 5 for children from the Department of Social Services of Suffolk. There were performances that night from the Rocky Point Singing Santas, and the smiles didn't end until the final stop in Wyandanch late Christmas Eve.

Christmas Magic has grown from a simple idea of reaching out to one homeless shelter 15 years ago to a full-time, year-round operation which raised more than \$150,000 this season.

To get on Santa's gift list, all it takes is a written letter to his office at the North Pole (9400 Townline Road, Hauppauge 11788) and the elves at Christmas Magic can make the wishes come true.

"We have so many people that are dedicated to our mission," said Russo, the chairman of the board at the Hope House Ministries. "The success of Christmas Magic lies in the recruitment of volunteers who handle everything from shopping for the gifts and



Newsday Photo / Alejandra Villa  
Commack High School lacrosse player Michael Gongas and Santa Claus help 5-year-old Kenya Flowers open up her Christmas gift

**'It changes your entire perspective on things. It's an opportunity to see how lucky you are and a chance to make others so happy. It's a fulfilling venture.'**

— *Commack lacrosse player Michael Gongas, on volunteering to help the needy*

wrapping the presents to the delivery at the different shelters."

Babylon High School football star Drew Peters was one of 10 All-Long Island athletes to support Christmas Magic. One night, Peters worked alongside Commack quarterback Mike Prahalis, Commack linebacker Clint Riggs, Smithtown quarterback Jon Zimmer (the National Football Foundation's top scholar-athlete for Suffolk) and Commack wideout Bryan Tornee.

They wrapped presents, loaded the delivery truck and helped set up a site in Brentwood.

"It changes your entire perspective on things," said Michael Gongas, Commack's star lacrosse player. "It's an opportunity to see how lucky you are and a chance to make others so happy. It's a fulfilling venture. I love to go... every night. Whenever I get the chance to help, I'm in."

One of Russo's favorite moments

this season came when fitness guru Jamie LaBelle earned his Santa suit at Pine Park.

"He graduated from elf status this year and got the opportunity to put on the suit and feel the emotion," Russo said. "I could see the tears in his eyes. He got to feel the warmth and see how the kids light up when they see him. He absolutely loved it."

Russo said others like Comsewogue football coach Fred Amodeo, St. Anthony's lacrosse player Matt LaBarbera, students from Comsewogue and St. Anthony's and Port Jefferson girls soccer coach Nancy Matura (who's been on board for 10 years) and all her players, are vital to the success of Christmas Magic.

"It all starts and ends with those people," Russo said. "And it's filled with all the smiles in between."

The Christmas Magic workshop begins in January for next year. Anyone interested in signing up as an elf or making a contribution can call 631-265-7200 and ask for Santa.

They'll be happy to hear from you.

## Comsewogue student-athletes volunteer to help spread . . . Christmas Magic to Kids

By Gregg Sarra  
STAFF WRITER

This was so much more than a touchdown scored or a volleyball spiked. This was teamwork of another sort. It was a group of Comsewogue student-athletes going the extra yard to give during the holiday season.

More than 3,300 children were the beneficiaries of a Santa Claus that came as early as two weeks ago and will work through tomorrow morning. These kids were identified through letters sent to Santa Claus from homeless shelters, schools, foster-care homes, Child Protective Services, safe houses and even private residences. Santa then makes door-to-door deliveries.

They've called it Christmas Magic since 1985. "We look forward to this every year," said Matt Lisagar, a senior defensive end on the Comsewogue football team. "I've been involved for three years and there's nothing like it. There's a warm feeling of accomplishment when you see how happy the kids are."

Lisagar narrowly escaped little Joey Fernandez, 6, who raced through the Pine Brook Elementary School in Brentwood, with his new toy truck Wednesday night. Joshua Santiago, 3, cradled a Magic Lights Elmo and Danny Cortez, 10, cried when Santa gave him the new blue bicycle he wished for.

"That's the magic of Christmas," said Kim Simpson, a sophomore volleyball player at Comsewogue. "It brings people together for what's right. It's amazing the way a kid's face lights up. It's great."

Christmas Magic blossomed to 1,550 kids last year before it doubled that total in 1999. It begins with a year-long fund-raising campaign by attorney Charlie Russo for Christmas Magic Inc. in Hauppauge. The children send their letters to Santa Claus, c/o Christmas Magic Inc., 400 Town Line Rd., Hauppauge 11788.

"We started with 26 kids in Brentwood," Comse-



Photo by David-Paul Grizzle

Comsewogue student-athletes, from left, sophomore Kim Simpson and senior Matt Lisagar help Santa (Charlie Russo) deliver presents to 5-year-old Elizabeth Santiago and her 3-year-old brother Joshua at Pine Brook Elementary School.

wogue special education teacher Fred Amodeo said. "We got the students together with Charlie and said let's help people during the holidays. And it went over big."

Various stores are targeted and Santa's helpers [students] take to the aisles to fill Christmas wish lists after store hours.

"We have seven periods of wrapping presents," Amodeo said. "Then we load the trucks and send them out to the designated sites awaiting Santa's arrival. When Santa leaves, we go shopping again, and do it all over for the next day."

As Santa (Russo) left Pine Brook, he said, "The spirit of the holiday season is not just captured in the eyes of the children that sit on Santa's lap but also in the eyes of the 300 volunteers, who realize after this experience what the season is truly about."

There is nothing like the smile on a child's face and Russo knows you can't put a price on happiness. That's why he makes each succeeding year bigger and brighter than the one before.

"If there's a true meaning of what Santa Claus is, it's Charlie," Amodeo said. "His office is the North Pole."

