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christmas magic

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BRINGING CHRISTMAS TO HOMELESS FAMILIES ON LONG ISLAND

Christmas magic

A HEARTWARMING STORY OF HOW ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBER CHARLIE RUSSO FOUND A WAY TO KEEP THE LEGEND OF SANTA CLAUS ALIVE IN THE 90'S.

by Mary Keese

Most of us who live and work on Long Island can not possibly imagine what it must be like to be homeless at Christmas. We are all so accustomed to enjoying our homes and sharing the holiday spirit with friends and family that we don't even think of not having wonderful holiday meals to eat and presents under the tree. However, many of our neighbors do not share such peace of mind.

On Long Island where single mothers and their children represent the largest group of homeless - not necessarily living on the streets, but moving from one shelter or welfare motel to another, such programs as Transitional Services of New York for Long Island, Inc. (TSLI), Resurrection House and Mercy Haven, oversee a number of housing programs designed to provide ... more than just a place to live, but a place to learn, to grow and to build a future.

These mothers may have fled from a home where they or their children were physically abused. They are the product of generations of hard times, the results of being under-parented, under-educated, unemployed and under-fed. They are people who have received inadequate, if any, medical or prenatal care. Their problems are complex and multifaceted. Residential programs provide trained case managers who work closely with mothers and their children. While living in the housing program mothers are taught parenting and independent living skills necessary to care for and manage a family, a home, and day-to-day activities. Residents also receive assistance in obtaining further education, job training and job seeking skills. The program is supported by contract monies from the Suffolk County Department of Social Services (SCDSS) and by individual donations. Referrals are made by SCDSS as well.

After being in crisis and shuffled from place to place, these families feel fortunate to be accepted into a shelter where the quality of their future lives and the possibility of living independently is the ultimate goal. Cathy V. has four children, ranging in age from one to 12 years. After being evicted from their Central Islip apartment because an estranged family member created disturbances in the building, they came to live at Bridges, one of TSLI's housing programs. "I want a better life for my children. So far it's okay. The staff is wonderful, they are courteous and respect our privacy," says Cathy. When Christmas comes, however, their expectations are tempered by their situation. Santa Claus is after all a myth and there isn't money for such things. Christmas is just another day...or so they think!

Enter, Charlie Russo, a prominent Hauppauge attorney, who handles the legal matters for the agencies. Charlie's appreciation for the psychological and physical needs of homeless people began many years ago, while living with thirty-five homeless kids in a boys' home in Melville. He remembers how difficult it was for the boys living there not to have much of a Christmas to look forward to. That memory has remained with Charlie Russo through the years. And even though the world of Charlie Russo today - over twenty years later - is crowded with responsibility he finds time and energy, especially at Christmas, to remember the less fortunate.

Charlie's professional life is saturated with the demands of managing his law firm and the concerns of his clients. He is a professor at Suffolk Community College where he teaches courses in Criminal Justice. He is Chairman of the Board of Directors of Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson and is an advisor to numerous other charities, including the Suffolk County Police Memorial Fund. For co-workers, colleagues, and friends, keeping up with Charlie Russo is a mind-boggling challenge. His law partner Terry Karl shares his insight into Charlie's character and personality, "Charlie just loves to deal with people. From a teenager in crisis to a client in trouble, he has an uncanny sense of what to do and how to do it.

Twenty years ago, at the group home where we met, I watched him defuse a potential crisis by sticking his head in a pan of chinese food. Now, in the practice of law, when he has to interview clients who are being sued for injuries inflicted to a homeowner's pet cat, he does so wearing the largest outfit ever known to man. Be it with humor or conviction, Charlie has a knack which allows him to put the situation in perspective and then react almost immediately," admired Karl.

For Charlie Russo, keeping up with his five children is his challenge and his delight. Charlie and his wife Carol are residents of Port Jefferson where they live with their children, four boys and one girl, who range in age from four to sixteen years old. After work, depending on the season, Charlie turns into a football, or baseball, or deck-hockey coach. Frequently, he ends his day travelling into Manhattan to pick up his oldest son, Peter, who performed this fall in "The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches", an off-broadway play.

Life in the 90's for Charlie Russo, day to day, week by week, year in and year out, is a juggling act - a constant attempt to keep the needs of family, friends, job and community in balance. When the holidays come along Charlie looks forward to spending quiet time between Christmas and New Years with his family, at his cabin in the Adirondacks. But, not before he tosses and catches one more time.

This tale of Christmas Magic reveals a crew of mischievous elves who possess the imaginary powers necessary to help Santa. Santa realized that the elves were critical to the evolution of Christmas Magic and he envisioned a valuable addition to his plan. The-Russo boys, Peter, Nick, Charlie and even the youngest Ben, have no problem assembling a group of young people who are happy to disguise themselves as elves and carry out the promise of Christmas Magic. Santa explains the significance of the elves, "I call it sensitizing. It is especially important that young people from comfortable, affluent homes are sensitized and introduced to those who are less fortunate. The elves underscore the message of Christmas Magic. The Magic occurs not only for the

STAFFING SANTA'S WORKSHOP IN THE 90'S

for Christmas and tell the homeless children how anxious they are to meet them on Christmas Eve. Finally, according to family and shelter, the elves are responsible for sorting and bagging all the gifts. Meanwhile, staff members at the shelters provide Santa with specific information, little idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, that Santa will mysteriously know about each child on Christmas Eve. Then, a few days before Christmas, Santa has one of his helpers consult with the directors of each of the shelters to schedule a time for Santa and his elves to arrive. Finally, the big moment, Santa arrives 90's style by way of a convoy consisting of four wheel drive vehicles and vans piled with gifts, accompanied by his entourage of magical elves and adult helpers. While overwhelmed children and grateful mothers open their gifts, the little ones sit on Santa's lap or visit with their own personal elf.

In plain clothes Santa Claus a/k/a Attorney Charlie Russo directs his elves just before Christmas Magic begins.



Throughout the month of November and early into December residents, both children and mothers who are temporarily living in shelters, are asked to write a letter to Santa. Many do not believe anything will really come of their Christmas dreams. Before the letters leave the shelters the staff members sort them so that letters from families are kept together. Attached to each family's letters is a "wish list" which provides the age of each resident and gives accurate sizes for clothing they are in need of. Once Santa receives the letters, he gives the letters and money that has been donated to his elves, whose job is to shop, wrap, and label the result of each request. The elves then answer each and every letter. They introduce themselves by first name to the homeless children. The elves promise to work hard preparing

HOW THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS WORKS IN THE 90'S

Karl continues, "In recent years his activity at Christmas in no surprise. Charlie is a man incapable of closing his eyes to the world around him. He doesn't just think about things, he has a need to do things. He can't just coach his son's Little League team, he has to raise money to build a new field. He can't just volunteer time at Hope House, he has to be chairman of the board working to raise the one million dollar annual budget. He can't just donate money for Christmas, he has to dress up as Santa and personally deliver hundreds of gifts to dozens of families in crisis. " In December, Charlie's focus is on a project he says "simply matches people of means, who want to give at Christmas, with people in need." Just after Thanksgiving, Charlie Russo becomes a modern day Santa Claus and directs a program that he calls - CHRISTMAS MAGIC.

children getting Christmas presents, but more importantly, it occurs for the kids doing the giving. These young people bond with the homeless kids. They spend time talking to them and getting to know them. Their eyes are then opened to the meaning of Christmas. The elves begin to understand and to respond to homeless strangers."

The sensitizing of Christmas Magic did not end with the New Year. "In the Spring, a group of 7th and 8th graders in the Port Jefferson School District, many who participated in Santa's Christmas Magic Program, sponsored a Bowl-a-Thon. They kept the magic working by raising over \$6,000 and donating the money to Project Bridges to build a play ground at one of the shelters," revealed Santa.

FUNDING SANTA'S WORKSHOP IN THE 90'S

"...it just happens!" says Santa

What began in 1985 as a very private gesture on Charlie's part, he simply reached into his own pocket to answer letters to Santa and delivered presents on Christmas Eve to five homeless children, is now a spirited program of giving and receiving that relies on private donations, solicited in a very casual and informal manner. For example, as the numbers increased in the late 80's and providing for all the requests of Santa became more costly, Charlie asked family, friends and co-workers to help Santa by donating to Christmas Magic in lieu of traditional gift giving at Christmas. But, it was not until 1990, when *Newsday* featured a story about Christmas Magic, that many people, even those close to Charlie learned about what he was up to. Most people knew that Charlie Russo loved to dress up as Santa Claus and go around giving toys to underprivileged children, but few realized the scope of his giving.

"I never knew that Charlie did this until I saw an article in *Newsday*. I immediately wanted to contribute," said Suffolk County Police Officer and Memorial Fund Director Craig Vasey. Since then Craig himself has generously contributed to Christmas Magic and he also collects money from players on the Memorial Fund Softball Team. "Last Year I had a particularly busy December, my wife and I were moving into a new home and my mother was very ill. I can't even remember where I was on Christmas Day, but I do remember coming home on Christmas Eve - or maybe it was Christmas Day - and listening to a message left on my answer machine from Charlie. He told me how appreciative he was for the money we had collected. He said he used to it buy three bicycles. Without a doubt that call made my Christmas."

As the holidays approach, people who know Charlie are beginning to just naturally think of Christmas Magic. Charlie will receive donations in Christmas cards from friends like Betty and Dick Meade who wrote, "John F. Kennedy said ... 'here on earth God's work must truly be our own' ... your Christmas Magic Program is certainly God's work. Thank you for letting us be a part of it." Last year Christmas Magic 92 answered the wants and needs of over 150 homeless kids and their mothers, purchasing, wrapping, labeling and delivering over 700 presents.

Just before Thanksgiving this year, Santa estimated that

Christmas Magic 93 will once again swell with requests. "Already I have letters from over 200 kids. We've added forty kids from Port Jefferson's Head Start Program," said Santa.

With absolutely no certainty that funding will come and with a ton of gifts to provide, Santa anxiously admits, "Right now I try not to think about it. It makes me very nervous." He chuckles, "It just happens!"

Santa insists that every gift on every list, no matter how hard to find or how expensive be delivered. The bulk of the funding continues to come from Santa himself and when even more money is needed, this modern day Santa simply leaves the workshop with his credit cards in hand, once again reaching into his own pocket to make Christmas as magical as he possibly can. "It will get very hectic and everyone will be yelling at me 'why don't you start this sooner'. But, by Christmas Eve," Santa reflects - with a slightly apprehensive look, "It all gets done ... it just happens!"

"It will also get very emotional," Santa adds. "For example, last year when all the presents were opened, I noticed one little homeless boy standing by himself with a forlorn look on his face. I knew he had asked for a bike and it seemed as if he hadn't gotten one. Mysteriously I disappeared. When I returned I was riding his bike. The little boy's mother started to cry. Larry Davidson, one of my adult helpers, started to cry. I started to cry. Next thing I knew everyone was crying."

Bruno LaSpina, Chief Executive Director of TSLI's Bridges says, "Charlie is a decent wonderful man. For the past three years he has made Christmas for our Bridges families. Without him and his spirited elves and their generous gifts, Christmas would be just another disappointment to these children."

By finding a way in these all too often selfish times to help those in need and to satisfy those who need to give, Charlie has found a way to bring forth the essence of Christmas. While he may be uncertain from time to time as to how exactly he will manage to continue this extravagant-colossal program year after year, he should be very certain that he has recaptured the spirit of Christmas. Moreover, he has shared his vision with young people and wisely given them an opportunity to experience for themselves the joy of giving. An experience that can only create in them a compassionate selfless character. A quality that is personified in love by Santa Claus, and that continues in the 90's thanks to Charlie Russo and a program known as Christmas Magic.

END

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