

# Santa, His Elves Spread A Little Christmas Magic Around

## Hauppauge group helps needy kids in Suffolk County

By Nancy A. Ruhling  
STAFF WRITER

**D**EAR Santa, My daughter asked me a few months ago to tell her the truth about Santa. Of course I told her there was no such thing. Now I'll have to retract that statement. In all of my life I have never seen any such thing as a real Santa, but that's what I call you. I could never find the words to thank you for what you have done for my girls. ... If you were here, I would give you the biggest hug you could ever get in your lifetime.

Thank you so much,  
JoAnn and Family

Yes, JoAnn, as you have found out, there really is a Santa Claus. He and his group, Christmas Magic Inc., live in the hearts and minds of the needy children of Suffolk County. And while the rest of us think we are busy buying and wrapping presents for our own families for the holidays, Santa and his Christmas Magic elves really have to hustle because they will deliver gifts to some 3,000 children by Dec. 25. And they don't even have Rudolph and his red nose to help!

For the folks at Christmas Magic don't just present age-appropriate toys to good girls and boys; they actually ask each child for a list, check it twice and try to fill it.

"When you ask for a Barbie doll, you don't just get Barbie," says Fred Amodeo, a teacher at Comsewogue High School in Port Jefferson Station and director of the school's BUTY (Bring Unity to Youth) program. "You get Ken, you get the house, you get the car, and you get some of their clothes," says Amodeo, who has some 35 students in BUTY who are Christmas Magic volunteers.

You can tell when the Christmas crunch hits the Christmas Magic headquarters, the Hauppauge law office of group founder and president Charlie Russo, because the place is so packed with presents it looks like the North Pole.

Once the gifts are all wrapped, Russo dons his red Santa suit, which he fills out quite nicely, ho, ho, ho, and distributes them to the various organizations that have signed up for the program.

In 1985, when he started Christmas Magic, Russo played Santa to about 50 children. Today, the group serves more than a dozen shelters, including Resurrection House, Mercy Haven, Bridges / Summit, Haven House, William Floyd Homeless Children and Youth Program, Concern, Marydale, Brookhaven L.C., DSS / Allstate, PR-ONTO, Child Protective Services and L.I. Women's Coalition.

"I think most people want to help but don't know how, and Christmas Magic helps them do it," says Douglas C. Manditch, president and chief executive of Long Island Commercial



Newsday Photo / Dick Kraus  
From left, volunteers Joan Kaiser, Judy Tharp, Elyse Craft, sitting, Terry Karl and Diane LaBarbera, read Christmas wish lists.

Bank, which collects toys and donates money to Christmas Magic. "We got hundreds of toys," he says. "Last year, we gave \$1,500, and this year it was

\$2,000."

While the Christmas in Christmas Magic comes with the giving of the gifts, says Amodeo, the "magic lies in

Charlie's coming and looking at you and saying, 'I need a little help.'"

Russo is indeed the spirit of Christmas Magic past, present and future because, by the power of persuasion and by working the county — or is it because he looks so authentic in that Santa suit? — he gets enough donations to run the program without ever having a fund-raiser.

Last year, through Russo's magic powers, the group raised \$63,500 in the 60 days before Christmas.

"We don't really have an operating budget per se," says Elyse Craft, Christmas Magic's secretary, adding that there are no employees to provide salaries for. "Last year was the first time we have had money left over, about \$16,000."

Through the years, Christmas Magic has been making its own Christmas list. What does it want? Everything — money, new toys discounted or donated by stores like the group's main source, Kay-Bee Toy Inc. in Port Jefferson, and individuals and volunteers like Joan Kaiser and Judy Tharp from Bell Atlantic who became elves this year and who are ready to do whatever is needed to get the gifts out.

Everything is a lot to ask for, even for a group that does so much good. Surely there is something it doesn't need?

"We don't need homeless shelters," pipes up Terry Karl, Christmas Magic's treasurer.

If and when Christmas Magic does get everything on its list, it will expand to include Nassau County, and it will begin bringing a little Christmas Magic to children all year long.

"We never say no," says Diane LaBarbera, vice president of the group. "We want to be able to provide school supplies and gifts for birthdays, too. Lots of companies get free tickets to sports events, and we would like to have these donated, too, throughout the year."

The big payback, Amodeo says, comes from the children whose lives Christmas Magic has touched. "We're betting on a future generation, several future generations, to do good for themselves and for other people," he says. "Hopefully, they will come back to say thank you or to volunteer. It's a domino effect."

That's where all the cards and letters like the one from JoAnn and her family come in.

"You have put a smile and joy in my children's heart," another grateful mother writes. "Thank you again and again."

Since it is Christmas, the happiest holiday for children, the last word should go to the little ones.

"My brother was so excited [when Santa came] he ran into the door, but he was OK," Steven, who was in the William Floyd Homeless Children and Youth Program during Christmas Magic 1997, told the volunteers.

And then there's Daniel, who was also in the William Floyd program. When Santa gave him a new pair of sneakers for Christmas, 1997, he said, "They're too big."

But did he want them exchanged? "No! I want to grow into them."

## At a Glance / Christmas Magic

Name: Christmas Magic Inc.  
Address: 400 Townline Rd., Suite 170, Hauppauge, NY 11788  
Phone: 516-265-7200  
Fax: 516-265-7578  
Founded: 1985

President and Founder: Charlie Russo of Russo, Fox & Karl  
Vice President: Diane LaBarbera, office manager of LaBarbera Chiropractic, Port Jefferson

Treasurer: Terry Karl of Russo, Fox & Karl

Assistant Treasurer: Kim Boyd, office manager of Russo, Fox & Karl

Secretary: Elyse Craft, paralegal, Russo, Fox & Karl

Volunteers: About 100