

Christmas Toy Drive headquarters finds new home in old landmark



Aurora's former LCBO location on the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Brookland used to be a guaranteed place to find a cheerful bell-ringer volunteering their time with the Salvation Army Kettle Campaign.

Now, the Salvation Army is breathing new life into the disused space as it transforms the store into the centre of their Christmas Toy Drive and seasonal efforts to make the holidays that much merrier for families in need.

The Salvation Army's Northridge Community Church, which has once again partnered with the York Regional Police on their annual Holiday Heroes gift drive while continuing work on their own program, celebrated their new location last week.

Set to formally open this week for families registered with the Salvation Army, the new space has allowed them to create a true 'shopping experience' for those in need, bringing renewed dignity and accessibility in finding just the right gifts to suit everyone's unique and individual family.

This year's work is being spearheaded by Angela Covert of Salvation Army Northridge. As a member of Mayor Tom Mrakas' Aurora Cares group, Covert says the Salvation Army was looking for a new distribution centre after a long stint at Newmarket Plaza. Both Mayor Mrakas and the Aurora Cares group helped secure the LCBO location for the program.

'I knew this space was still empty at Brookland and Yonge. I wanted it but I didn't know how to get it,' says Covert. 'I made mention (at Aurora Cares) that I needed the space' and the Mayor said, 'Let me figure out how you can get this space.''

Northridge was just about to sign a lease on a space on Yonge Street just north of Eagle Street, when she got the call at the eleventh hour from property owners, the Region of York, that everything had finally aligned.

After a bit of a cleanup and a few tweaks, they were able to begin the move-in process on November 18.

'We needed a place to set up our toys and this year we're going to have more of a shopping experience where [clients] will be able to come in and pick the toys for their children,' says Covert. 'In the last few years, the way the program ran was toys were provided to clients in a bag out the door and they didn't come into the depot. Here, I wanted to create an atmosphere where they could come in, be greeted, connect with a volunteer, get signed in and that volunteer would take them around to choose the toys for their children based on ages, etc. Everybody will get at least two items, plus stocking stuffers, plus books and whatever else we have on hand at

that time.?

When Covert came into her current role in June, she began a full audit of the programs Northridge offers, taking a particular look at how their food bank operates, which sees volunteers prepare boxes of food for families that are then picked up by the recipient.

Working with a student from Seneca College, they have identified gaps in this format where some of the food distributed to clients aren't particularly to their taste, leading to some food being left unused and wasted.

They hope to have a similar shopping experience for food bank clients starting in January, so this year's toy and gift distribution will serve as something of a beta test.

"It's dignity, it's accessibility, it's choice," says Covert of the new model. "Who better knows what their child needs? Do I expect some complications and some issues? For certain. I have to be prepared for that, but any of the families I've talked to have said, "Thank you."

They want the experience to be "transformational" rather than "transactional" at the end of the day and they hope that "our guests who come in will see they're cared for and it is beyond the Christmas season that we can be here as a support as well as a resource for them."

As of now, Northridge 250 registered families and they anticipate serving more than 400 youngsters this season. Toys are always a great donation, but Covert reminds anyone thinking of contributing to the cause to keep teens 14 ? 17 in mind as well.

A perfect gift for this demographic, she adds, are gift cards.

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