

Need only grows as Neighbourhood Network Holiday Gift Drive marks 10 years



By Brock Weir

For over 10 years, Neighbourhood Network has teamed with non-profits in the community to make the holiday season a little brighter by collecting gifts, food and other items for families in need ? and, one decade on, the need only grows.

Neighbourhood Network launched its 2018 Holiday Gift Drive this past Monday, an initiative that will last through the home stretch, right up until December 21. 400 non-profits throughout northern York Region have partnered with the volunteer organization this year, highlighting the diverse needs ? yet, in many cases, very basic needs ? that impact all corners of York Region.

?Every year the needs grow and grow, which is scary in a way because that means more and more people are falling through the cracks and more and more of them are seeking social services,? says Maggie Pelyvas, Neighbourhood Network's lead on the Holiday Gift Drive. ?All of our success comes from the community because they are the ones donating to our program and we found in the last couple of years a lot of local businesses have stepped up and decided to do a team-building activity by adopting a family. It is a great experience for them as a team and it is great for us because it just shows that once people know there is a need and a specific case they are more than willing to do everything to help.?

This is particularly heartening as Neighbourhood Network encourages businesses, groups, teams and even individuals to take on ?adopting? a family or person in need for the holiday season.

?Even though we have an adopt-a-family initiative, it can be adopt-an-individual,? says Ms. Pelyvas. ?With the AIDS Committee of York Region, for instance, they have a number of individuals who need a bit of Christmas cheer and have clearly fallen through the cracks. I try my best to match the right family or individual with the right sponsor. It can be daunting, so even if you don't want to adopt a family, even if you just drop off two cans of soup, I'll hug them because I am so grateful for anything and everything.?

Last year, Neighbourhood Network's Holiday Gift Drive helped adopt 108 families in York Region and, in the process, collected an estimated \$66,000 worth of donations to the cause. Some donated those two cans of soup, some donated toys, others donated some new clothes, but oftentimes these donations came in the form of gift cards, a particularly hot commodity when it comes to this particular gift drive.

?Sometimes we have had people coming in and saying, ?My kids have grown up and they don't need anything, so we decided to adopt a family because we have everything and more,? but when you see the wish lists from some of these people, at the top are diapers and wipes because they ran out of funds and are unable to buy it themselves,? says Ms. Pelyvas. ?It just really clicks with people when all they have requested are rolls of toilet paper or a can of tuna.

?The number one item for all the families is food, even if it is a non-perishable item of food, a gift card to a grocery store, whether that is Walmart or the Superstore where they can buy home goods and clothes, it is a two-for-one package for them. The second item would be toys. The third is probably gift cards. That way they can go out themselves and buy anything they need on their most urgent list.?

Additional needs include items perfect for teens and adolescents ? requests often include gift cards for Chapters, Cineplex and restaurants, or items like earbuds ? and Christmas trees, whether they are fresh cut or gently used artificial trees that still have all the

necessary pieces.

"I love this time of year because we get to see firsthand the impact our initiative has on people," says Ms. Pelyvas. "We don't generally get to meet the people that we help, but when we do you can see these people are in dire need and they have been screened or recommended through an agency they are a client of, we know that any donations that leave our office are going to a home that is in dire need. I think what makes our program unique is we know the most urgent needs and as soon as I have those donations in, I make sure those urgent needs are the first ones filled."

For more information on the Neighbourhood Network Holiday Gift Drive, visit neighbourhoodnetwork.org/?t=programs&id=2 or call 905-726-3737.