

Random Acts of Kindness raised smiles during holiday season

By Brock Weir

A rogue elf hijacked a busload of seniors from the Oak Ridges Retirement Community, joyriding through Aurora, King and Richmond Hill in the lead-up to the holiday season.

Along the way, they encountered one kid, however, who is likely to remember the experience for a very long time.

"One lady we stopped in her car said, "Oh, what a nice surprise," says Catherine Olaveson of Oak Ridges Retirement Community. "Her child was acting up in the back seat of the car, so she automatically put the back window down and said, "See, Santa is watching you."

You can take the rogue elves out of the North Pole but you can't take the North Pole out of the rogue elves.

That was the premise Ms. Olaveson and the seniors were sticking to as they made their way through the three communities spreading Christmas cheer one random act of kindness at a time.

Loading up the bus, the seniors started the day in King, bringing the local fire department as well as the Richmond Hill fire department a fresh, hot lunch of stew, tea biscuits and desserts made by their in-house chef, as well as Christmas cards.

From there, the seniors and their rogue elves were Aurora-bound, headed for the Industrial Parkway South building shared by Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, Hospice King-Aurora-Richmond-Hill and the York Region Food Network. They were laden down with gifts of a different sort, making donations of \$500 to \$1,000 to each of the organizations.

And they got some lunch as well.

On the way back, they stopped at No Frills, where they kicked the randomness up a several notches.

"As people came into the parking lot, we were handing out Tim Hortons gift cards, saying, "Surprise! You are receiving a random act of kindness from us," says Ms. Olaveson of what transpired before the misbehaving little boy realised Santa was all-ears.

"People were just shocked. I was dressed up as an elf and everybody had on hats and red sweaters. The No Frills parking lot was the best because people were saying, "Pardon?" "Wow!", "For me?!" People were just very emotional.

"When we went to the organizations, of course, that is a very emotional thing at this time of year. People were really grateful. The firemen were so thrilled and just so gracious and thrilled."

When Ms. Olaveson pitched her idea to the residents, there was an immediate buy-in, she said.

"Seniors still have something to contribute to society, something meaningful, and there was a warmth and pride [amongst] the seniors," she says. "It also brought up a lot of memories. One lady was telling me her son, his whole life, had been a Big Brother and he ended up adopting three boys who were brothers when he became an adult. It was just a kick-off to getting people to share really personal stories but the pride was just amazing that seniors were able to be participating, that is for sure.

"[Our takeaway was] slow down and enjoy this time of year because certainly time gets away from you and we're rushing, rushing, rushing. Slow down and look someone in the face. We miss our kindness every day because we are rushing and that is the beauty of being engaged with a person you are coming across, a stranger. This gentleman ended up talking to us in the parking lot at No Frills and telling us where his wife was, and that is why he was doing the groceries, there are so many beautiful stories that people get to share because you have engaged them in this random act of kindness.

"King, Aurora and Richmond Hill are so close and intersecting all the time that we need to look at just collaborative initiatives and enjoying each other as neighbours again."