

# The Spirit of Christmas brings smiles to many seniors

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the northern light

Christmas Spirit is in the air, especially for those who will feel the joy of the Spirit of Christmas.

Santa Claus and his team of elves will visit about 180 seniors in their homes in the Chaleur region this week, bearing a bag of gifts and wishing them a jolly “Merry Christmas,” as part of the Spirit of Christmas initiative.

The Spirit of Christmas was started by the City of Bathurst several years ago. It is now run by the Anglophone North School District and a committee of helpful volunteers.

“They saw a need in the community be it through loneliness at Christmas, which is our most joyous times of year, most of us,” said Audrey Ronalds, community engagement co-ordinator with Anglophone North. “Or a need financially with seniors who we see the cost of living skyrocketing – such things as gas for our vehicles, light, heat, necessities, food.”

Ronalds heard about the initiative from the city and was asked to get the schools in the Anglophone North on board.

It started with one class at Bathurst High School because the students wanted to do a pay-it-forward activity.

It grew to include all of BHS and eventually all of the schools in Anglophone North from Jacquet River to Janeville. Corporations, private sector businesses, independent owners, provincial government, individuals and more also got involved with the initiative.

It started with visiting about 20 homes, and has escalated to about 180 homes.

There are many reasons why the seniors are chosen to get a visit from Santa.

“These seniors are very proud and the seniors that benefited from the Spirit of Christmas each year are seniors living in their own homes, self-sufficient, not in nursing homes and probably with very little pension,” she said. “And noticing everything skyrocketing around them, they understand the value of budgeting and

living within their means and if they had a choice between buying groceries and paying their bills, they were paying their bills.”

Finding out about all of these seniors in the region is a collective effort.

Ronald said mailmen, church workers, doctors and word of mouth are all ways the committee learns about who Santa and his elves should visit.

Ronalds said many seniors choose their right to stay living at home because when someone moves to a nursing home, they can not only lose their house, but their car, independence, pets and more.

Some seniors receive a box of chocolates and a Merry Christmas while others will receive a bag of goodies that contain necessities and food such as coffee, cereal, facial tissue, toothpaste, molasses, bread, a word book, gum and much more.



What makes the bags a little more special are the cards made by students from the area. The schools involved range from daycare to middle school.

The Spinning Wheel’s knitting club spends all year knitting things for the bags. Last year every bag came with knitted slippers and the year before it was hats.

They differentiate which are men's or women's items by wrapping it in different coloured paper, so the proper item reaches the right person.

Some helpful groups also make baked goods for the bags.

Ronalds estimates that about \$15,000 gets spent on food alone. It goes up to about \$25,000 including the gift cards provided in many of the bags.

Each bag has roughly \$120 worth of contents inside.

It's not the goodies that get many of the seniors excited.

It's the fact that someone thought of them and paid them a visit during the special time of year.

"The critical part of all this is Santa pays a friendly visit and let them know they're not on the naughty list and Santa has found them," said Ronalds.

Ronalds read some letters sent by people thanking the Spirit of Christmas committee for the heartwarming visit.

"Words of thanks don't seem like enough for what you and your Spirit of Christmas committee have done to brighten the days of so many of our seniors," the letter began. "I just received a phone call from my dad and he was so excited from his visit with Santa this morning. You wouldn't believe the excitement in his voice.

"Actually yes you would because you hear it so many times in the homes you visit ... He was telling me about the bag, the bag of goodies and the card from the children and the chocolates and the bread. When Santa left he had tears of joy."

Another letter also highlighted the happiness the visit brought two men and also their niece.

"I just thought I would share with you how proud I am to say my son goes to Parkwood," the letter started. "My father went on telling me how Santa stopped by my uncles' place ... and they brought some food with him along with a card that said it was from Parkwood Heights. He went on to tell me how happy they were and they had smiles on their faces. For one of my uncles, he hasn't been the same since he got hit by a car and my other uncle's health is not that good and they are both hard to understand at times. However, that day they got a visit from Santa and we knew that they were extremely happy. They told everyone they could in their family and I was the one that could say 'my son goes to your school.'"

Ronalds said the visits also warm the hearts of Santa and the elves, who are members of the Spirit of Christmas.

As happy tears fill the eyes of the seniors receiving the visit, happy tears fill the eyes of the of the volunteers paying the visit.

Ronalds said the main goal of the program is to bring to joy to people during this special time of year.

“A long as we can offer a little bit of comfort to a senior living at home, that is what our whole intention is and to instil this into the younger students,” she said.

On Dec. 12 the Spirit of Christmas will hold an open house to pack all of the bags of goodies. The bags will be distributed to the homes on Dec. 13.

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