



Gifts surround a Christmas Tree at the Black River Valley Club last December during the 16th annual Children's Christmas Gift & Fund Drive.

A tradition of giving continues

For nearly 20 years, the Carr family foundation has worked to brighten the holidays for many

BY NORAH MACHIA

IT ALL STARTED MORE THAN 25 years ago at the Watertown office of Bernier, Carr & Associates as part of an effort to spread some holiday spirit.

Paul G. Carr, a founding partner of the engineering and architectural firm who was chief executive officer at the time, decided that helping children from low-income families would be the best way to accomplish it.

"I sent a memo to the shareholders asking them to buy two Christmas gifts — one for a boy and one for a girl," he said. "I told them they needed to pick out the gifts themselves, no help from their spouses."

He also asked that each gift have a minimum value of \$25, and "that they use their own money. Nothing on the company credit card," Mr. Carr added.

The most important thing, however, was that "they really thought about what they were picking out for the kids," he said.

"We had an amazing response," Mr. Carr said. "Everyone really ended up enjoying it."

More than 100 toys were purchased for needy children that year. Mr. Carr, his wife, Kathleen E., and their daughter, Elizabeth, packed the toys into a van and distributed them to several local nonprofit agencies.

The gesture, which seemed to have put everyone in the holiday spirit, was so successful that it was eventually opened up to the community. Letters were sent out to clients and associates asking them to participate as well.

As the annual children's gift drive became increasingly more popular, the engineering and architectural firm also started to accept cash donations from those who didn't want to shop for particular gifts, but wanted to support the effort in another way.

"Cash donations gave us greater flexibility" to also help those in need who may not be served by the traditional holiday fund drives, such as elderly residents in nursing homes, Mr. Carr said.

The annual Children's Gift and Fund Drive is now sponsored by Bernier, Carr & Associates and the Paul G. and Kathleen E. Carr Foundation. Approximately

\$25,000 in cash and gifts were donated last year, said Bernard H. Brown Jr., the current CEO of the firm.

More than 1,000 invitations will be sent out for this year's event, which will be held at a reception scheduled from 4 to 8 p.m. on Dec. 1 at the Black River Valley Club, 131 Washington St., Watertown.

The Children's Gift and Fund Drive is open to anyone who would like to make a donation, even if they are not mailed an invitation, said Mr. Brown. The mailing list is compiled from past donors, and the firm always welcomes new contributors, he said.

Those who cannot attend the Dec. 1 reception can drop off donated toys in advance to the Bernier, Carr & Associates office at 327 Mullin St. Cash donations will also be accepted.

"For many people, this is their way to kick off the holiday season," Mr. Brown said. "They're doing something to help others, and that makes everyone feel good."

Past supporters have come from a range of backgrounds, including architects and

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engineers with other firms, doctors, lawyers, small business owners, community leaders and municipal officials.

The Children's Gift and Fund Drive also receives support each year from staff at the Jefferson Rehabilitation Center. They conduct their own fund-raisers to support the drive, he said.

Those who participate are still asked to bring two gifts— one for a boy and one for a girl. The gifts should not be wrapped, however, because otherwise it would be difficult for human service agencies to distribute the appropriate gifts to the children. People are asked not to donate stuffed animals as those could cause problems for children with allergies.

"We've found that people select toys based on what they played with in their childhood" and some of the popular ones have been Legos, Tonka Trucks, Barbie Dolls and Lincoln Logs, Mr. Brown said.

Numerous food pantries that provide Christmas assistance to low-income families have benefited from the annual Children's Gift and Fund Drive, including food pantries in Antwerp, Cape Vincent, Carthage, Chaumont, Clayton, Depauville, Evans Mills, Orleans, Philadelphia, Theresa and Watertown.

The donated toys have also been distributed through the Rohde Community Center, Adams, the Clayton Council of Churches and the Clayton Improvement Association, Deacons of the United Presbyterian Church, Sackets Harbor, Faith Fellowship Church and Good Samaritan Society of St. James Church.

Nonprofit agencies that have received toys and cash donations include the Children's Home of Jefferson County, Catholic Charities, Community Action Planning Council, Jefferson County Department of Social Services, North Country Children's Clinic, Salvation Army, Victims Assistance Center of Jefferson County and the Watertown Urban Mission.

"They have been extremely good to us," said Nina O. Hershey, president of the Rohde Community Center board of directors. "We have really appreciated it."

The nonprofit agency based in Adams provides assistance to low-income families throughout the towns of Adams, Ellisburg, Henderson, Lorraine, Rodman and Worth.

The Rohde Center receives a donation of toys, along with a financial contribution, each year from the annual Children's

Gift and Fund Drive, she said.

The donated money is used to purchase additional toys to help "fill a gap" for the families who aren't able to sign up in advance for annual Christmas assistance, Ms. Hershey said. Donations are also used by the agency to purchase gifts for older children, or those who may be lacking an age-appropriate gift, she added.

"We like to buy gift cards for the older children" so they can pick out their own items according to their interests, Ms. Hershey said.

The Rohde Community Center also

uses the donated funds to give a "pizza party" for more than 75 children and their families at the Adams American Legion. The annual party is held in conjunction with the Toys for Tots program conducted by local members of the United States Marine Corp., she said.

The support from the Children's Gift & Fund Drive has helped the nonprofit agency staff ensure that every child in their service area receives a meaningful Christmas gift, she said.

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