

## A Season to Give

By Ilene Withers

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Sherry J. told me when she found me in the office break room before work last week. “I never know what price to mark these at.” She sat a tray of perfectly golden bar cookies in front of me. The tops were dotted with red, blue, yellow, and green, all from miniature M&Ms lying just beneath the surface.

“You brought your Dream Bars!” I exclaimed. “Definitely price them at 50 cents each.”

“You don’t think that’s too high?”

“Absolutely not,” I assured her. “It’s for charity.”

Indeed, our office has been adopting families in need for the holidays for the past decade. When I started work at the Registrar’s Office in 2000 I discovered they held a traditional bake local food bank. The next year I suggested that we adopt a family instead. I knew there was tremendous need and felt that adopting a family would be more personal for all of us.

Some of my coworkers were hesitant at the idea. “We’re already so busy with grades and degrees at the end of the term. Do we really want to take on more work?” was one comment. “You can’t buy a gift card with the bake sale money for these people. They might spend it on cigarettes and alcohol,” another said. Others agreed with her, assuming that the family was poor because of degenerate lifestyles. I had a ready reply for every complaint. “Sure we’re busy, but don’t we need something to smile about rather than to grumble all the time.” Or, “The children should not be penalized. They deserve a Christmas.”

More people supported the idea than didn’t and I contacted a local charitable organization to ask for a family we could adopt. The paperwork we were provided alerted us to the fact that

our assigned family spoke only Spanish. Not a problem I thought, the day I received the assignment in the mail. I popped up out of my chair and looked over the Dilbert-like cubicle wall at Naomi. I smiled at the sight of her, perfectly coifed hair, inch long acrylic nails, and an attractive business suit made her unlike any other workstudy student I had ever met, but she had grown up in El Paso and was fluent in Spanish.

“Hey, Naomi,” I said to catch her attention. “We got our Adopt-a-Family assignment. It says they speak only Spanish. How would you feel about calling them to set up a delivery time and going with us to take their things over.”

“I guess,” she said in a voice that feigned disinterest, but with a sparkle in her eyes that bespoke otherwise.

Our office was assigned a single mom, her three younger children, and her adult son, along with his wife and baby. In addition to the annual bake sale, I passed around a sign-up sheet for those who wished to donate a gift to one of the family members. Soon the gifts began to come in, gaily wrapped in red and green seasonal paper with big bows and colorful ribbons.

“I had so much fun,” Sue C. told me as she handed me a large flat box. “I haven’t had an excuse to shop for kids’ clothes in over 20 years.”

Aaron A. handed me his package. “I got a remote-controlled car,” he said with a huge grin. “They had a demo set up in the store so I tried it. It really moves fast!”

To please those who did not want us to provide gift cards, I asked two of my coworkers, Yvonne B. and Kim C., to go shopping with me to buy food for our family. At Sam’s Club we each took a shopping cart and went through the store together.

“I think we should buy some cold cereal for them,” Kim said. “That’s high priced in the store and it’ll probably be a treat for the kids.” She grabbed Honey Nut Cheerios off the shelf.

“Do we want to get turkey or ham for their Christmas dinner?” I asked.

“Both,” was my coworkers’ decisive reply.

“Let’s buy bananas, apples, and oranges,” Yvonne insisted. “Poor people never get enough fresh fruit.”

It took two cars to haul the bounty to the recipients. The three of us, along with Naomi, arrived at the apartment and rather nervously knocked on the door. It was our first adopted family, and we weren’t quite sure what to expect. A smiling woman and two adorable children greeted us. They offered to help us bring everything in. The woman, upon seeing the gifts and food, began to cry and speak in Spanish. Kim, Yvonne, and I could only hope they were tears of happiness until Naomi grinned and translated for us: “She says, bless you, bless you, bless you.”

The two children helped as much as they could. I can still remember the dark eyed little girl clutching a five-pound bag of spaghetti against her chest like a baby doll as she hauled it into the small basement apartment. It didn’t look like it could have more than three tiny bedrooms tucked away down the short hall. The living room held an old brown couch and a small TV on an unsteady looking stand. Yet the curtains were open and letting in the late afternoon sunlight. I was pleased to see a small artificial Christmas tree in the corner decorated with colorful balls, gold tinsel, and a silver star at the top. By the time we hauled in load after load of groceries and set them on the table, then the counter, and finally on the floor, the space looked as if it had been turned into a warehouse. After several trips the six-year-old, who spoke English, looked at me with hopeful eyes and said, “Did you bring presents or just food?”

“We have presents for everyone,” I told him with a smile.

I was rewarded with a toothy grin. “Good,” he said as he reached over to take my hand and walk back to the apartment with me.

Back at the office I knew it was important to share our experiences and set the stage for the following year. We had come away with a warm and wonderful feeling that we knew would be difficult to top. I sat down at my computer and composed an email. Because of our office, an underprivileged family would be sitting down to a laden Christmas table and would experience the same excitement in opening gifts that other people around the world would experience. Within a minute or two of hitting the send button, replies came flooding in. "Let's do it again." "That made me cry, Ilene." "Merry Christmas!"

In 2003 Carla W., a supervisor in the Financial Aid office, approached me, "We want to help with the Adopt-a-Family," she told me succinctly. It made sense as they share the building with us, and it doubled the number of employees working toward the fundraiser. Also, someone at work recommended that I consider a used book sale as part of our fundraiser. It was a resounding success. In fact, the donations had grown bountifully, and we were getting \$400 to \$500, which allowed us to generously provide for the family. The naysayers had finally been won over and I announced that we would be buying Wal-Mart gift cards for the families instead of buying groceries.

In 2006 disaster struck. I stood looking out at the drifts surrounding our home, watching as the snowplow made its slow way down the street. "We'll never get the gifts delivered," I told my husband with a note of sadness in my voice. "I wish we'd brought them home yesterday." Each year, as the gifts and monetary donations came in at work, I locked them carefully in our office vault for safekeeping. Now, due to the blizzard, the campus and roads in the area were closed. "We were supposed to deliver them tonight," I bemoaned.

"There's nothing we can do," my husband replied just as the phone rang. It was Janet E. She and her husband were young retirees from our office, and they often popped in just to visit

and had contributed to the fundraiser. “We’re going to go to the office and get the gifts,” Janet informed me. “Alan says it won’t be too difficult in our 4-wheel drive and we’ll take a snow shovel with us. Is there anyway you could meet us this afternoon in north Loveland?”

I looked back out at the drifts. The sun was shining brightly, causing diamond like twinkles on the pristine whiteness. “Sure,” I said, even as I wondered how on earth we would get the car out of the driveway.

It took my husband, daughter, and I a couple of hours to dig our way out of the driveway and down the short street of our townhouse complex using only a spade as we had no snow shovel at the time. With aching backs, bright red noses, and cold fingers we finally achieved our goal and met the Janet and Alan for the gift exchange. We were so thankful that we were able to play Santa despite the heavy snow that year. The couple had three children. The oldest boy and his father helped us unload everything, carrying it across a snow packed, slippery street and up a narrow staircase. The modest apartment was spotless, the table had been scrubbed so many times it had a small hole in the Formica top. The little bit of furniture they owned barely filled the miniscule space. The man smiled, shook our hands and shyly told us “Mucho gracias.” The woman expressed her delight with hugs.

The book sale had begun to dwindle by 2008 so we called a halt to it, but a coworker approached me with a new idea. Bev M. is a crafty person with an enormous heart, and she suggested that we have a silent auction of hand crafted and good used items instead. The office enthusiastically participated in this new activity. In fact, the competition became amusingly stiff. As the daughter of a sculptor, I had once thought it would be fun to try my hand at rock sculpting. I purchased a piece of granite about a cubic foot square, as well as the chisel and

hammer I would need to attempt this new hobby. Of course, I never got around to it, so I lugged that rock and the two tools to the office for the auction.

“What on earth is that?” Bev asked, here eyes wide at the sight of the rock.

I explained and she laughed and said, “Well, okay, we’ll see if it sells.”

“I’m going to buy that rock,” Mary R. informed me later in the day. She is an artist and I thought about how much fun it would be to see what she made. Later in the day she appeared at my desk again. “Damn that Edie,” Mary whispered to me. “She’s bidding against me.” Even later Mary appeared again. “Somebody else is bidding against both of us!”

The rock and tools sold for \$25. The silent auction brought in a few hundred dollars for our cause and we made the decision that it was time to start adopting two families every year. I now request a total of 10-12 people in two families each year.

2009 is a year I will remember forever. One of the families we were assigned had six members – a mom and five children. The children ranged in age from a baby boy to a 16-year-old girl. In preparation for delivery, I called the home and the 16-year-old answered the phone.

I explained who I was and then asked, “Is there anything in particular that your family needs?”

“We could really use a microwave,” the girl told me. “We don’t have any way to heat up the baby’s bottle quickly.”

I jotted that down. “Anything else?”

“Well, we could use some pots and pans.”

Three women offered to go together to buy pots and pans for the mother. I used some of the donated cash to purchase a microwave. The delivery day arrived and three of us pulled up in front of a dilapidated yellow town home with a load of prettily wrapped packages and a \$400

Wal-Mart gift card. A little blonde-haired girl answered the door. When she swung it open there were two more crowded around her. They ranged in age from five to ten. All were dressed in thin, cotton sundresses that had been laundered so much their original colors were faded. They were all barefoot. The older girl and the mother appeared, their dark Brunette hair sharp contrasts to the younger girls' paler complexions. They were both dressed in baggy sweats and t-shirts.

I stepped into the living room and managed to school my face to avoid showing the shock I felt. The living room was empty except for a rickety metal TV tray with a lopsided and tiny silver tinsel Christmas tree decorated with paper snowflakes sitting on it.

"I would invite you to sit down but I haven't gotten any living room furniture yet," the mother told us. Before any of us could reply she went on. "We do have mattresses upstairs to sleep on," her face reflecting embarrassment as she told us.

I have never before seen children's eyes light up quite so much at the sight of gifts being brought in. As we carried the gifts in and handed them off to the children, they investigated each one. They looked at the nametags, handed them to the correct person, and then carried them carefully to set them on the floor next to the tree. "I wonder what it is?" one little girl said. Another shook hers gently next to her ear. "It rattles!" she said with excitement in her voice.

Last year our two offices did an outstanding job at fundraising. The Financial Aid office had a white elephant exchange at their holiday party, but instead of trading back and forth, they could put money into the Adopt-a-Family fund to keep it. Also, we all got the opportunity several times to pay \$2 to wear jeans to work instead of business clothes. At the end of the fundraiser, we had just under \$1200.

This year we raised money in October at a bake sale preview. We also had the opportunity to pay \$2 per day to wear jeans the week of Thanksgiving. We are now at the end of

the second week of the bake sale. Daily, when I lock the cash into the vault, I find a 10 or even a 20-dollar bill dropped in the collection can out of someone's generosity. The silent auction is scheduled and the families have been requested. We are already signing up to donate gifts.

"Have we gotten our families yet?" Robert H. asked me a few days ago. He likes to have his daughter pick out a gift for another child to teach her important life lessons.

"Not yet," I told him, "but soon."

"If you need me to call them, just let me know," Sylvia M. said as she overheard. She speaks Spanish and is always willing to call the family ahead of time.

We stood in our festively decorated lobby, secure in the knowledge that we each had jobs when so many didn't. We all seem to take pleasure in the knowledge that we have this opportunity to help our Adopt-a-Families have a wonderful holiday. Instead of complaining about how much work it is when grades come in, we talk about what we bought for gifts for the family or exchange recipes from the bake sale. The last thing I hear as I walk out the door before the holiday is a cheerful reminder, "Be sure to email us and let us know about the Adopt-a-Families after you make the delivery."