

'Tis Better to Give

Looking for somewhere to channel that holiday spirit? We've got some suggestions—several local charities need your help now.

by Kiera Missanelli



Toys for Tots

It started with one handmade doll. In 1947, the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation came to life in Los Angeles thanks to the wife of Maj. Bill Hendricks, who made a doll and asked her husband to donate the toy to a child in need at Christmastime.

He did one better. Hendricks and a group of Marine reservists collected and distributed 5,000 toys to needy children. The movement caught on and has continued to be a success for Marine Corps Reserve units across the nation, including that of Centre County.

For 25 years now, Gene Weller has directed the Toys for Tots initiative in Centre County and says he's felt the Christmas spirit through the work, especially when he sees former "tots," all grown up.

"Over the years we have had folks tell us that they were Toys for Tots kids and now that they are in a position to give

back have done so," Weller says.

One was Bob Ott, who died last year, but grew up to become the director of the organization's adult services. Ott grew up with a single mom in Johnstown, and times were tough for the household. One Christmas, Toys for Tots gave Ott two used games, and he told other volunteers the moment changed his life.

Efforts in the Centre Region were less organized when Weller, who became an active member of the Marine Corps Reserve in 1984 after serving in the Marine Corps for three and a half years, moved to the area and wanted to get involved. As the only face of the Marine Reserve Corps in Centre County at the time, Weller was struggling to single-handedly distribute toys when he found the local Nittany Leathernecks Detachment. They agreed to help him—just as long as he joined their group. From there, the organization grew, pulling in other local

services to help. Now in the middle of the 25th campaign, the Centre County chapter will continue to take toys through Dec. 12. The organization also uses volunteer gift-wrappers; show up at any of the following sessions listed at right.



PHOTO BY GREG GRIECO



PHOTO BY GENE WELLER

Festival of Trees

The Festival of Trees, that annual community event that transforms the Snider Agricultural Arena into a winter wonderland, underwent a little transformation of its own this year. The festival is now under the direction of the Centre County United Way, with the proceeds going to the organization's partner agencies.

But the rest will look familiar—local businesses and organizations will still purchase and decorate more than 100 live trees that will be displayed for the thousands of people who turn out for the event.



PHOTO BY GREG GRIECO

According to Centre County United Way Communications Director Megan Evans, the Festival of Trees holds a special place in many people's hearts. She points to the story of a friend who spent her first Christmas with her late husband at the festival and has held on to that memory ever since, sharing it with her loved ones.

She continues to attend annually, though now with her son's girlfriend. The trip is a do-over of sorts—Evans' friend didn't give the young woman a chance when her son introduced them, so she makes up for it by inviting her to come see the trees each year.

"It was my intent to bring her joy," Evans' friend, who asked not to be named, says of their first trip. "But watching the sparkle in her eye match the twinkle of the lights as she went about picking her favorite tree, and hearing the delight in her voice as she read about and asked questions about our helping community organizations, I felt the unique brand of joy that comes from giving."

The event will take place Dec. 8 to 10 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and on Dec. 11 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. In addition to seeing the trees, visitors can shop craft vendors, have breakfast with Santa, do children's arts and crafts and more.

One Warm Coat

One Warm Coat is not your typical coat drive. The umbrella organization sponsors more than 2,500 coat drives across the nation—including one in the Centre Region—during Christmastime, and it all began with one drive in San Francisco.

National President Sherri Lewis Wood heard about a small group in San Francisco during Thanksgiving of 2000 but was not satisfied with the small number of people the group reached when she thought about the millions in need. So, she made it her mission to organize similar coat drives across America, a success story she credits to her "possibility thinking."

According to Community Outreach Director Sybil Hunt, health experts report that just a two-degree drop in body temperature results in a reduced heart rate, loss of coordination and confusion. Body temperature greatly affects adults' ability to work and a child's ability to learn.

The coats can help. Donations are accepted nationally through Jan. 16 at Burlington Coat Factory stores, but area residents kicked off the campaign last month, when the Penn State chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America sponsored a drive on campus, collecting a total of 250 coats. •SCM

Show You Care

There's a place to help this holiday season at every turn. Here are some specific ideas for how to lend a hand:

Charity: Toys for Tots

How you can help: Drop off new, unwrapped toys in any Toys for Tots bin before Dec. 12. Join the public wrapping sessions on the second floor of the Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel Dec. 10 and 11 from 2 to 4 p.m., Dec. 12 from 4 to 8 p.m., and Dec. 13 from 1 to 8 p.m.

Charity: Area families in need

How you can help: Pick an angel off the tree in the State College Area YMCA and shop for the requested item. Then drop it off at the Y by Dec. 15.

Charity: The AIDS Project of Centre and Clinton Counties

How you can help: Attend the 14th Annual Taste of the Town Dec. 4 at the Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel from 6 to 10 p.m. Proceeds go to help HIV-positive members of the State College community.

Charity: Centre County United Way

How you can help: Attend the Festival of Trees Dec. 8 to 10 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Dec. 11 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Proceeds benefit the United Way partner agencies.

Charity: Centre County Paws

How you can help: Head to Stocker Subaru Dec. 10 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to find a furry friend at Home for the Holidays, an event to place animals into foster and adoptive homes.

Charity: Centre Furnace Mansion

How you can help: Get your photo taken with Santa Dec. 11 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Proceeds benefit the mansion.

See additional listings in "This Month" on the next page for more ideas about how to help.