

Area non-profits have plenty of holiday needs

BY ERIN ANDERSON
Special to the Record-Eagle

These are just a few of the many worthy area charitable organizations. The following offers this year's needs and a little about what they do:

This year the **Women's Resource Center** in Traverse City is asking supporters to respond to the wide range of families' needs by providing them with gift cards.

"Gift cards will give them the option to buy whatever they really need at this time," said Jody Smith, WRC's volunteer coordinator.

Smith encourages gift cards from some of the larger, all-inclusive retailers, such as Target, Kmart or Meijer, as they offer the most options to families with a variety of needs such as groceries, shoes, clothing and — especially crucial for the elderly — a pharmacy where they can use a gift card to purchase medications.

"We often get requests to sponsor young children, but many families are extended and include grandparents or maybe teenagers. They need help too," said Smith. "Our goal is to fill in some of the gaps."

To donate or volunteer, call Jody Smith at 941-1210.

Community Meals Program
A hot meal two nights a

week — that's what Sandra Svec and friends have been serving up for over 16 years as the Community Meals Program.

Every Sunday and Monday night, Trinity Lutheran Church, in conjunction with 10 other area churches, hosts a hot dinner for anyone who's hungry. The food is donated by local restaurants, while any gaps are filled with supplies from the program's food pantry. While the Sunday and Monday dinners typically feed between 40 and 60 people, the most well-attended by far are the holiday meals: Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"The number of people definitely keeps increasing. A large percentage of our guests are homeless, the rest just need a decent meal," said Svec.

These ambitious holiday undertakings require plenty of volunteer support to keep things running smoothly. During the holiday meals, donated clothing is distributed to those in need.

"This year we really need winter coats, snow pants, men's underwear, hooded sweatshirts — and especially socks," said Svec.

Personal care products like soap, lotion, and shampoo are also given out as gifts. Christmas set-up is at 8:30 a.m., Dec. 24. Donations of clothing and other items

are accepted at Trinity Lutheran Church the day before the meals. To get involved call Sandra Svec at 263-7130.

Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy

If northern Michigan's wild and scenic places have given you peace, inspiration, or a chance to connect with family and friends, then you understand their importance to our quality of life.

"When you make a gift to the Regional Conservancy, it's an investment in both the future of our region and the future of our children," said Glen Chown, executive director. "Your dollars stay in our area."

Love to spend time outdoors? Volunteer to be a Preserve or Trail Steward and help care for properties that have been protected. To make a donation call Desiree Worthington or, to volunteer, Abby Gartland at 929-7911.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Michigan

"It's not about big, extravagant gifts or activities, it's really just about these kids having another adult in their lives who will spend some time with them," said Mary Sue Christian, executive director.

Most mentors, called "Bigs," spend an hour a

week with their "Little"—a child between the ages of 6 and 12. And the need for Bigs' involvement has never been greater. There are currently over 200 children on the program's waiting list — the largest number ever.

According to Christian, studies show that 80 percent of "Littles" have improved in the area of self-esteem, and 67 percent have improved in academically since they were joined with their mentor. Children are paired with mentors on the basis of common interests and personalities. Mentors are supported and trained by BBBS case managers, all of them professionals in the social work field.

Don't have the time to commit to weekly visits? Consider being a "Big for a day" and pair off with one of the waiting list "Littles" at an event. You must be at least 18 to be a mentor.

Monetary donations to support this program are always welcome, especially this year, in the wake of serious budget cuts.

To make a donation, call 932-7810. To become a "Big" or to volunteer to work at a fundraising event, ask for Gary Swaney, program director.

Child & Family Services of Northwestern Michigan
For some Michigan chil-

dren, Christmas doesn't come with gifts and festivities that many of us receive. Child & Family Services currently oversees over 200 children in foster care homes, as well as dozens of other children and families in various educational and counseling programs.

"Many of the children and families participating in these programs will have very little, if any, of their holiday wish list fulfilled without community involvement," said Gina Aranki, CFS's marketing director.

Gift amounts have been set at \$75 per child under 12 and \$100 for teens and older.

Businesses, organizations and individuals are invited to sponsor a single child or a whole family. CFS also runs a holiday store, which allows children in need the opportunity to "shop" for gifts for their families using play money. Donated items and store volunteers are needed. Cash donations will help purchase additional store and Wish List items. To fulfill a wish list, to donate cash or your time, call Gina Aranki or Kathy Ferguson at 946-8975 by Dec. 17. For more check their Web site at www.cfsnwm.org

American Red Cross
The NW Michigan Red Cross will be expanding its Disaster Action Team pro-

gram to more effectively meet increased local disaster preparedness needs. DATs are comprised solely of volunteers and the training is free. Once volunteers have training and experience on the local level, they are also qualified to assist with Red Cross national disaster relief efforts.

Quality medical care is one of the most basic and pressing needs for seniors, but having access to that care can be a challenge. For many area seniors who can no longer drive or who have mobility issues, just getting to their doctor's office can be impossible feat.

The Red Cross' new Senior Medical Transportation program aims to change that. Beginning in January, the program will employ a fleet of volunteer drivers who will shuttle seniors from their homes to their respective doctors' offices and hospital appointments, even appointments as far away as Grand Rapids and Ann Arbor.

The Red Cross will partner with 26 local agencies that will help identify seniors' needs.

To volunteer for the DAT program or to be a medical driver, contact Executive Director Kip Dottie at 947-7286 or www.redcross.org

Erin Anderson is a local freelance writer.

Real-life 'characters' who bring Christmas to life

When I was a child, I couldn't wait until December because then the Advent calendar came out of its box. I loved opening the paper shutters of each tiny window as a candle, a star, a tree or a toy was discovered. But I was especially delighted when the day's window revealed a Christmas character — a Nutcracker, a wise man — an angel, perhaps.

As Christmas approaches, I wonder about my inclination for people over things. What I have gradually discovered, like the curtains of a puppet show opened by a child, is that the Christmas "characters" are important because of their connection to each of us. They are here as we gather family, friends, neighbors and perhaps some new folks, too. I chuckled aloud when I realized that these people more or less represented those Christmas characters.

I think about the Christmas morning gatherings on the

east side of Detroit, and I see that my friend's mother, Mrs. Widmann, was like Babushka of Russian lore — the obsessive housekeeper who was too busy ironing everything with her beloved mangle in the basement, too busy dusting under the beds, to follow The Star when the Three Kings asked her to join them.

Realizing what she had missed and remorseful, Babushka later made up for her remission by abandoning her treasured home to spend the rest of her life traveling to give toys to poor children. Like Babushka, Mrs. Widmann's home was clean to the point of sterility, but like the fabled character, she made gifts for the neighborhood children — knitted mittens from colorful scrap wool and she created the most elegant of all Christmas treats — pastel-washed Marzipan fruits. Later in life, she realized that the real gifts she had given to her family were not ironed sheets, but those

of nurturing.

Yes, Scrooge was at the neighborhood go-arounds, too. That was Mr. Murdock, a tall, unsmiling man who carefully worked with insurance numbers at his office, adding, subtracting and gathering facts. Behind his back, neighbors chatted about poor Murdock: he always folded his poker hand first; never let his spaniel out of the dog run for a walk; banished his only child to the kitchen during evenings with a radio, so he and his wife could read books-of-the-month in a small reading room uninterrupted. Yet, at Christmas, Murdock was Scrooge reformed, circulating among the men, carrying a few glasses and a bottle of his best Scotch.

There was an angel at the gatherings, too — Viola Mullins, a woman of unlimited kindness and optimism. Stern neighbors gossiped that she as a divorcee — taboo then, a Scarlet Letter among the holly berries.

A free spirit, Viola served children punch in fancy red glasses, those usually reserved for adults. She frosted chocolate cakes with pointed dollops and called them porcupine cakes. She told the children, over the fence and matter-of-factly, about boys and girls, love and romance — and sex — when their own parents would not.

Viola also wore her hair in a sassy up-do, which we children adored. Always a flower, a bit of ribbon, and for Christmas, a holly sprig was tucked in the knots of hair.

My mother and father were Mr. and Mrs. Santa. Their connection as helpers to Santa became more suspect and waned, year-by-year, as I grew older and sadly, more literal.

Then there was The Woodcutter-toy maker, reminded me of my uncle, who whittled fishing lures most of the year, yellow and

green spotted flatfish and stumpy lures called Riverbunts for walleye.

But at Christmas, he would create tiny carved boxes for my dime store trinkets.

My tall, stern, German and Lutheran grandfather was another character from holiday myth, The Forester, who brought home the tree.

Though living near the center of Detroit, he always brought a scraggly fir branch to his home, obviously discarded by a more discerning person. Grandpa set the branch up as a small tree, trimmed with my uncle's gold paper cigar bands, bits of foil and always silver tinsel.

These real-life characters made my holiday rich, but it was not complete without the Christ Child, and I had Him then and still do. He is a tiny figure, only two inches or so



BY SALLY D. KETCHUM
Local columnist

long. The figure is an antique — Italian-crafted infant, beautifully painted, his eyes open and focused.

He will come out of the box of decorations soon, for I have him still in my heart, above all the Christmas people in my life.

Sally D. Ketchum is a local freelance writer who is a self-confessed Christmas lover who enjoys all the trappings of the holiday.

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