

BEYOND SANTA'S LITTLE HELPERS

LONG BEACH GIVES BACK

WRITTEN BY TAMARA KOMUNIECKI

It is easy to get sentimental during the holidays; the time of good cheer and good will. Most of us also spend some time thinking about those who are not, for one reason or another, able to enjoy this time of year. We think of them as we wrap a gift for a loved one, slice through a roast turkey, and snuggle with someone special in front of a roaring fire.

Article reprinted from Long Beach Magazine, Coastal Living City Style, by Tamara Komuniecki, December 2008

There is a pillow in the home office of Karen Braverman-Freeman that is emblazoned with a thought that she uses as a guiding principle: "A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the type of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world might be different because I was important in the life of a child."

And there can be no doubt that the world is different, and better, for many Long Beach children and their families, thanks to the efforts of Karen.

The recipients of her efforts are not your average children or families. These are the ones who have been dealt a double blow - diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, and whose families are challenged financially at the same time.

Linda Muro-Garcia, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with Jonathan Jaques Children's Cancer Center in Miller Children's Hospital at Memorial Hospital, explains the Adopt-A-Family program that benefits from Karen's work.

"It's a program that's been going for some years," she says, "in which we identify our neediest of patients during the holidays; newly-diagnosed with cancer or a serious blood disorder, in relapse or generally in great need. And we match them up with people in the community who say 'We'd like to help a family out for the holidays.' This is for the whole family, so for the patient, siblings, as well as the parents."

A family that needs help is identified and given a wish list to fill out. They can include items they need, and those that they want. People who wish to participate can use funds that have been raised to fill the family's wish list, or donate their own money to purchase gifts. It's a dream for someone like Karen, who enjoys finding things all year round for the holiday giving.

"I'm shopping all year long and I donate everything that I can find for the kids. I store everything at my house until the season, and then everything comes out of the big plastic tubs," she says.

That effort culminates in a frenzy of organizing and wrapping for a week before the gifts are given to the families. Special wishes are fulfilled where possible, as well. Karen shares a story about a 15-year-old cancer patient who wanted a guitar.

"I have a friend who is a wonderful gospel guitarist at the House of Blues," she says. "And I contacted him and asked him if he knew a store or someone who could donate a guitar. And the someone that could was him - he donated a beautiful guitar and a book for her and then he actually wrote a card out to her that he would come and give her lessons wherever she wanted."

All gifts are given anonymously so kids and their families are not aware that it is Karen (or any other of the volunteers who participate in the program) who was their Secret Santa. But recognition is not why these big-hearted people do their good deeds. For Karen, you could say it was something she always wanted to do.

"When I was a little girl, my dream was to be one of Santa's elves or to help Mother Teresa," she says. "It was a really unusual dream for me because I'm Jewish. In my faith we have a word called mitzvah and mitzvah means blessing or good deed. And so I think that most of my life that's really what I've tried to do for the less fortunate."

"Dave San Jose and Karen Braverman-Freeman are just two among so many who do quiet work, often without recognition, to make the world a better place for those who need a little help. If you are inspired to make a difference as well, we've compiled a list of local organizations and events of the season where you can make a donation, or help out."

To donate, mail checks written out to "LBCL" to The Long Beach Cancer League, 936 Pine Ave., Long beach, CA, 90813 — with a memo that the donation should go to "Adopt A Family".