

Christmas festivities



Each year, hundreds of people gather at College Avenue United Church for Operation Sharing's Christmas Day event. They enjoy food, gifts, music, and games.

Each year, several hundred people turn out to share good times together at Operation Sharing's Christmas Day event. And this year looks like it will be no exception.

"We're looking at many people joining us Christmas Day," said Marilyn Schmiedl, who coordinates the event. It takes place in Woodstock's College Avenue United Church, in the church's Memorial Hall. The event runs from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and has been going on for close to 16 years.

The free event attracts not just people in poverty but everyone from politicians to police officers. There are gifts, music, food, and games. Anyone who doesn't have a place to go for Christmas is welcome at the event.

A core group of about a dozen volunteers, who work in the days leading up to the event, are joined by dozens more – some of whom just come to socialize with folks who might be lonely – on the big day. And what does it all mean to the people who attend?

"It's a day they can share with others and not be alone. Merry Christmas to all," Schmiedl said.



Free barbecue

The Rapid Relief Team's Woodstock chapter, in conjunction with Operation Sharing, held a free barbecue for people with modest incomes on Friday, Sept. 27. The event was held in the parking lot of College Avenue United Church in Woodstock.

Coats for Kids/Adults another success

With early winter weather already the case this season and more of the chilly same in the forecast for the coming months, Operation Sharing's Coats for Kids and Adults program is particularly welcome for many.

Each year, several hundred families make use of the program, which provides varied winter clothing beyond coats – there are hats, mitts, boots, and more as well. And this year's edition of the program, which distributed free winter clothes near the end of November, was no exception when it came to the demand for it.

"The demand has grown," said Marilyn Schmiedl. She and Kathy Stephenson coordinate the program, which runs out of College Avenue United Church in Woodstock. Numerous volunteers also pitch in to make the program a success.

Boxes to receive donations were set up at more than 20 locations locally, with some more locations being added this year. Some organizations set up boxes of their own and many individuals made donations, Schmiedl said.

The Knights of Columbus donated coats. Total Rentals lent scaffolding to hold coats.

Call 519-539-3361 for information about any of our programs.



Thanksgiving dinner

Volunteers from Unifor Local 636 and Operation Sharing teamed up again this year to put on a Thanksgiving feast for people who are less fortunate. The meal was enjoyed by many.

Bullwinkle's

WOODSTOCK – Running out of Indwell's Harvey Woods Lofts, lunches are available on Tuesdays and Thursdays (from 11:45 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.) at the Bullwinkle's Eatery and Hospitality Training Centre. People are asked to donate on a

sliding scale, from \$1 to \$7, depending on their ability to pay.

Food for Friends

OXFORD COUNTY - Please remember to continue to generously give your 25 cents each time you shop at supporting grocery stores in Woodstock and Ingersoll year round.

The Inn

OXFORD COUNTY – The Inn homeless shelter, which serves all of Oxford County, is at Old St. Paul's Anglican Church in Woodstock.

It's free of charge for those 16 and up. It operates nightly from 7:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.

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Christmas Place is special to many

Operation Sharing's Christmas Place will once again be offering new gifts to parents, grandparents and children this year. And it's special for a lot of people, says the program's coordinator.

"I think what makes it special is the experience of Christmas shopping without the high price tag, which our clients can't do," Kathy Gardiner said.

The gifts come with reduced price tags – for example, a gift worth \$10 will be marked down to \$1. There are also free books, hats, and mitts.

The program – which runs in conjunction with the Power of Hope and the Children's Aid Society of Oxford County – operates out of College Avenue

United Church in Woodstock. Donations (including gifts, cash, cheques, and gift cards) will be accepted there weekdays until Dec. 13 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Shopping days for parents and grandparents are Dec. 10-12 from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and children 3-16 (they should be accompanied by an adult) can shop Dec. 14 from 9 a.m. to noon.

Shopping is by invitation only and invitations are at Oxford County churches and most social service agencies.

Gardiner thanked various local businesses that have donated time and materials in getting the word out about the Christmas Place.

The gift

Marcie got on the school bus that had stopped to pick her up at her rural Ontario home, proudly carrying a porcelain doll. The doll was the centrepiece of her Christmas and was her favourite gift of the Christmas break ... she intended to display it at show and tell during class today.

"Good morning, Jack," the Grade 3 student said to the bus driver. It was the first day back at school after Christmas and she had missed him. He smiled, tipped his cap to her and beckoned her to take her seat.

As Marcie sat down, she looked forward to the next stop on the township road the bus was navigating. Her friend, Sandy, was to be picked up along the way.

The bus came to a stop at Sandy's home. She wore a coat that had long since worn out its welcome but Sandy's family could ill afford a new one,

particularly since the girl's father was in hospital with a life-threatening illness.

As Sandy boarded the bus, Marcie looked forward to showing her the doll. Sandy smiled when she saw Marcie and made her way to her seat beside her friend.

"Hi Sandy," Marcie said, "I'm happy to see you."

"That's a nice dolly," Sandy said. "I had hoped to get one like it for Christmas but mommy couldn't afford any presents this year."

Marcie paused. Then, she spoke.

"This dolly is for you, Sandy."

"Really? Awesome! Thank you!"

Marcie handed the doll to her friend. Show and tell would be even better today.

- *Short story by Eric Schmiedl, Writers' Café
Coordinator*

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