

Continuing a tradition of giving at Christmas

Local hair salon delivering goods for a decade

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Posted 12/16/09



Delores Lembach, center, helps Sister Patricia McLaughlin, right, executive director of the Caroline Center, bag toys at Lembach's Arbutus hair salon Dec. 11. Lembach, her employees and customers collected toys to donate to the Baltimore center, which trains unemployed or underemployed women for nursing and pharmaceutical jobs in Baltimore. The women then give the toys to their children. (Staff photo by Sarah Nix-Pastrana)

When Delores Lembach was growing up in south Baltimore in the early 1950s, her mother always used to say, "Christmas is for children," the Francis Avenue resident said.

"My mother never cared to get a gift, but she wanted to make sure we got one," said Lembach, now 64.

That concept of giving is one that has stuck with Lembach through the years, and one she has honored for the last 10 years by collecting Christmas presents for underprivileged children at her small hair salon on East Drive.

Lembach first inherited Rene's Hair Stylist from her friend Mary Ellen Myers, who died 10 years ago this Christmas Eve and left the small salon to Lembach, a longtime employee.

Myers had her own tradition of holiday giving to families from St. Benedict, and when Lembach took over, she wanted to continue the salon's philanthropy, she said.

With an eye toward helping children, Lembach contacted both the Baltimore County Department of Social Services and the Caroline Center, a job training and education center for women in Baltimore City, to see what she could do to make Christmas better for families in need.

Every year since, both organizations have sent Lembach a list of needs, and Lembach has gotten to work collecting toys and children's clothing and stockpiling them in the salon.

This year was no different.

"Right now our shop is overwhelmed with toys," Lembach said last week, a few days before nuns from the Caroline Center -- which was founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1996 -- came to collect a portion of the donated toys. The rest were later taken to the social services department's toy distribution center at Woodlawn High School.

The donations of the salon are an annual treat for the unemployed and underemployed women receiving nursing and pharmaceutical training at the Caroline Center, about 80 percent of whom are single mothers, said Sister Patricia McLaughlin, the center's executive director.

The center collects presents from Lembach, as well as from local partner institutions like Loyola University and the College of Notre Dame.

It then allows the women from the center to select gifts for their children.

The program provides the women and their families with a holiday experience that would otherwise be impossible for them, McLaughlin said.

There is more to the effort than the sheer volume of gifts that Lembach collects with the help of her customers and her employees -- including stylists Fran Schalin, Eileen Roach, Sara Cousins and Mary Fry.

It is the longevity of Lembach's commitment with the center that is so remarkable, McLaughlin said.

"It's wonderful to know every year, a little before Thanksgiving, Delores will call me and say, 'OK, Sister Pat, we're ready to go,'" McLaughlin said.

"She doesn't know these people.

"She just does it because she believes kids need Christmas and wants to help."

Deborah Ward, director of volunteer services for the county's social services department, concurred.

Ward said during the holidays, the department tries to match every family receiving services with a donor family or organization that will provide them with a holiday meal and gifts.

But every year, there are families who can not be matched and who the department helps by allowing them to visit one of its two toy distribution centers, Ward said.

Every year "like clockwork," Lembach takes a pile of toys to the Woodlawn High School location -- the other location is in Essex -- to support the effort, Ward said.

"It's just automatic with her," Ward said.

"I don't have to call her and ask her," she said.

"We have some donors who come and go, people decide that they want to do something else, but she's really a solid donor."

Lembach, who has lived on Francis Avenue with her husband Lawrence for the last 28 years and raised her sons Larry and Michael there, said her work collecting toys begins just after Christmas, when stores put all their merchandise on sale.

She buys them with her own money, with money donated by customers and by her stylists, and with money earned from a 50-50 raffle the salon holds. This year, the raffle is for a Baltimore Ravens quilt made by one of the stylists, she said.

Starting each year on Dec. 26, Lembach said she keeps an eye out for deals, and also calls companies and asks for special bargains.

Last February, Lembach said she found Barbie castles at a Giant Food store in Pasadena that originally cost \$50 but were on sale for \$12.50. She bought all 16 in stock.

Soon after she found robot toys that originally cost \$69 but were on sale for \$19.99, and she scooped those up too.

After sitting in wait in the salon all year, both the castles and the robots will be given out this Christmas, she said.

"We've got oodles of presents," Lembach said with a chuckle.

"We're a little shop, but we have a big heart."