

## **Give and You Shall Receive**

Each and every year the months seem to fly by as December makes its way onto the calendar; taking many by surprise at how quickly yet another year has gone by. In spite of the blinding white blankets of snow, bone-chilling temperatures and icy road conditions, December is a month anticipated by all, as it marks the onset of the holiday season! Yet, along with the festive atmosphere comes the Christmas chaos: the dreaded shopping mall madness, bumper to bumper traffic and endless treks around the parking lot in pursuit of an empty space. Countless hours, effort and money spent for only one day of the year! Just imagine how different our world would be if everyone put forth the same amount of energy and dedication for the benefit of others! Unfortunately many of us, infected by the holiday bug, often lose sight of the real reason for the season!

After twenty-six years of guiltily focussing on myself and only those within my immediate circle of family and friends, I decided that it was time for me to start acting in the true spirit of Christmas by reaching out to others within the broader social community; particularly the children and families involved with the Down Syndrome Association. My mind had been set upon attending the annual children's Christmas party from the moment that it had first been introduced to my colleagues and I by our professor, Dr. Ashleigh Molloy. Graced by his knowledge and expertise in the field of Special Education, Dr. Ash inspired many of us to actively uphold the principle of inclusion, not only within our own classrooms as educators, but through our everyday interaction with others as well. This year the 5<sup>th</sup> of December marked the annual day of festive fun; each room alive and buzzing with conversation, sounds of children's laughter ringing through the air and an overall sense of excitement for the arrival of the jolly old fellow in red. With a little sprinkle of Christmas dust and the help of countless volunteers, the school cafeteria of Don Bosco secondary is magically transformed into a happy holiday haven! Filled with the merriment of the season everyone unites for one common goal: to share in the spirit of giving. Year after year there is an astonishing outpouring of people, both young and old, who generously devote their time and share their musical, artistic, culinary and creative talents with all those who attend. Whether lending a helping hand by adorning the walls, distributing food, facilitating crafts or capturing these remarkable moments on camera, everyone plays an integral role in the overall success of the day.

As an elf from Santa's workshop, sporting a red and green smock, pointed felt shoes and a bell-tail hat, I was given the opportunity to directly interact with each of the children:

welcoming them with a candy cane upon their arrival, conversing with them about what they had asked Santa to bring them for Christmas, as well as dancing and singing along to

countless popular children's songs and Christmas carols. Among the countless gifts that I distributed to the children that day, the one that proved most valuable was neither wrapped nor exclusive to one individual. On behalf of my family and fellow colleagues who also partook in the joyous event, the seemingly small contribution that we made to the Down Syndrome Association had, in fact, left a large imprint in our hearts and minds. Each time a child's eyes lit up, a smile spread across a face or a tiny pair of hands reached out for an embrace, we became aware that we were, in fact, the one receiving something special that day - a gift far more valuable than any amount of money could buy.

This experience proved to be both humbling and rewarding; dissipating the cloud of materialism and selfishness that often looms over my head during the holidays and prevents me from appreciating the people and things which are of true value and worth in my life. In hindsight I've learned that the holidays are not about indulging in the fast-paced race to find the perfect gift for everyone on your list, nor is it about eating the most elaborate meals or attending the most upscale parties. Instead I have learned that giving of oneself to serve in the interest of humankind is not restricted to the holiday season alone, but is a lifelong vocation. It is only in the act of giving and demonstrating human compassion that one's heart can truly open up to receive the most precious gift of all – LOVE!

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