



Local people rush to aid of needy families in Cornhill

12/22/2009 01:34:00 pm [Dana C. Silano / Utica Daily News](#)

UTICA, December 23, 2009 -- Area organizations, agencies and office departments are getting into the holiday spirit of giving by donating to needy families and children in Cornhill.

Gifts of food, Christmas treats, toys and clothing will be distributed to residents of Johnson Park Apartments & Family Shelter on Christmas Eve.

"We are just grateful to be able to have a Christmas celebration for our families and single women in the Johnson Park Apartments program, anyone in the shelter, and other families in the Cornhill community," said Johnson Park Center CEO Rev. Maria Scates. "We do what we have to do to make it happen, and we're grateful for those who stepped up to the plate and said 'We want to help out.'

"Around October, JCTOD hands out Christmas registration forms that the families and residents fill out so that if someone should ask how they can help during the holiday season, they have guidelines and ideas to go by, Scates said.

"If nobody gives us anything, we would make it work with what we have, but with people being generous, it will cause our families to have one of the best Christmases we've been able to do here," she said.

Scates said she's expecting nearly 100 people, plus staff members, to come to the Christmas Eve event.

"Everyone -- all mothers, single women, children, people in shelters and even alumni members -- will be here," she said. "We will eat dinner together and share and be grateful."

Amy James of Hamilton College said colleagues and students each year support the Christmas Celebration's cause. Just in food basket donations, members of the faculty, staff and student body sponsored seven families -- one with as many as ten members. But they didn't stop there.

"We've had a long association with them and our chaplain is on the board, so we always help out with the gift drive," James said. "Usually, around early November we ask for a list and then post those things on our own web site. The students have a lot to do with the gift drive -- they even put up a mitten tree at the college."

For the past four years, departments all over the Hamilton College campus adopted families to buy for, James added. They made food baskets and gathered holiday treats and gifts requested by those families.

"I think it's getting bigger and better," she said. "We've given more gifts this year than in the past. I do know some Johnson Park families through volunteering and visiting, and some of the kids went to school with my own kids. They're always incredibly appreciative."

The reaction from the college community is reason enough to keep on participating in the annual collection, James said.

"It's so amazing how many of the students who will just walk into my office and ask 'What can I do?' -- To see students and departments take such care to wrap the gifts, put cards on them and make people happy..." she said. "I get to really appreciate working at Hamilton because it's such a generous community. I am always very touched at how people care for making holidays special for kids and families that don't have much."

The Human Resources Department of Utica National also contacted Scates with intentions of giving this season. They went shopping and collected cars, action figures, dress-up items and gift cards for various families, said spokeswoman Karen Frederick. The very women who humbly request help this holiday season are the women who inspired the group to give.

"JCTOD spoke at our company's United Way kickoff meetings," Frederick said. "The women's stories were very emotional, both for them and for those of us listening. After the meetings, our staff talked about how moving their stories were and we wondered if there was something we could do."

She said the determination to help each and every individual in her community made Scates a very influential and trustworthy leader.

"Rev. Scates is really trying to make a difference in people's lives," Frederick said. "We feel thankful to be able to help others. We are happy that this small gesture could bring some joy to someone in need during the holidays."

To Scates, however, it's not about her. It's about being able to relate to what the families of Johnson Park Center endure in their life journeys. She knows first-hand.

"When you have experienced homelessness," she said, "the holidays can be a very difficult and challenging time. Gatherings and celebrations like this help to pick up people's spirits, make them feel good about themselves and make them feel loved and cared for. Some of our mothers will share their first clean and sober Christmas with their children. It's just a wonderful thing. It brings a bonding of families and also of a community. We all look out for each other."

Schedule for Christmas Celebration:

- 11 a.m. Gathering JPA documents, Coloring Contest
- 11:25 a.m. Songs: *Joy To The World*, *Silent Night*
- 11:35 a.m. Christmas Celebration meal, Open mic – Seasonal greetings, photo session; for the children: coloring work book
- 12:35 p.m. Christmas Blessing
- 1 p.m. Receive JPA Goody Bag

This Event is being sponsored in part by Hamilton College, SUNY-IT Sociology Club, Utica National Insurance Co., Johnson Park Center & Funding Partners: United Way, NYS CACFP, Oneida County Workforce Investment Board, Youth Bureau, DA Operation Impact, City of Utica, various businesses & individual supporters.