

Big 'thank you' from grateful recipients of Christmas cheques



PEGGY CURRAN

on charitable giving

"Donations to this year's campaign are still most welcome."

What kind of Christmas can you buy for \$125 anyway?

A gift for your child that you chose and wrapped yourself. Diapers. Electricity.

A freezer packed with ready-made dinners. Boots to replace the ones you've been wearing stuffed with the plastic bags to prevent water from leaking inside.

The knowledge that somebody out there cares.

Generosity is a very personal thing.

Where we choose to give our money, and how much we donate, is a matter for our consciences – and maybe the tax department.

Whatever you gave this year, wherever it went, know there's a stranger out there who wants to say thank you.

Don't believe me? Speak to people at just a few of the 150 local agencies that worked with The Gazette Christmas Fund to distribute 8,266 cheques this year.

People like Sister Dianna Lieffers, who has been the pastoral assistant at St. Gabriel's church in Point St. Charles for the last 38 years.

Lieffers spends a good part of December gathering ingredients for the 400 food baskets the Roman Catholic parish gives out during the holiday period.

"I tell volunteers. 'Pretend you are packing that basket for your best friend.'" It's also her job to choose who will get the 50 cheques St. Gabe's gets from the Christmas Fund.

Lieffers favours people living alone who suffer from mental illness, because they aren't apt to cook themselves a big meal.

"This way they can buy themselves little treats they can't usually afford. There are also a lot of Muslim families living in the neighbourhood. They have dietary restrictions and can't eat a lot of the foods that are in the baskets," Lieffers said.

"Someone might need a pair of boots. After Christmas, they will come up and

show me, 'Look, sister, this is what I bought with my cheque.' I'm almost in tears sometimes, they so appreciate that money."

The fund, launched by the Gazette in 1987, distributed \$1 million to needy Montreal households this year. That's \$51,000 more than has been raised in donations so far this year. Takings are down slightly from last year, when a single donor bequeathed \$26,000 to the fund.

Donations to this year's campaign are still most welcome.

However, any new gifts would only be eligible for a 2012 tax receipt.

"The biggest comment we get when people find out they'll get that cheque is 'This is going to make my Christmas,'" said Cyril Morgan, executive director of Welcome Hall Mission. "It's heartwarming to hear them say thank you, but of course the real thank-yous belong to the people who give to the Christmas Fund."

"When we receive the cheques, we definitely feel like Santa Claus," said Diana Pizzuti, the head of housing at the Women's Y who decides how to allocate the 100 cheques that come their way.

"A woman might decide to buy a gift for her child that hasn't been donated or put \$50 toward bringing down a debt."

For single women living on the fixed income of welfare, a disability or old age pension, that cheque offers a rare chance to splash out on a restaurant meal or buy a new bra.

"Lingerie costs a lot more than a T-shirt."

But Pizzuti said those \$125 cheques also give recipients something intangible that means the world but doesn't cost a cent. Recognition.

"It gives people a sense that they deserve something," Pizzuti said.

"Most of them are lacking in self-esteem. In some cases, there are good reasons for that. They've made bad choices, and they've had to live with them. Others have talents and hope but they've had a lot of misfortune.

"So to know somebody out there cared enough to give them a gift, that's pretty special.

"We appreciate it. You don't know how much."

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