

# Popular gift-giving program looking for new local Santa's to help spread joy



by **Mike Renzella**

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HALDIMAND—While the holidays bring cheer and joy in abundance every year, for many, they are a chance to spread goodwill in the community. If you're that type of person, Haldimand's unique, volunteer-driven gift-giving program Santa to a Senior could really use your help this year!

The program, now in its fourth year, collects personalized gifts for senior citizens and those with special needs in the community and then hands them out in a joyous holiday gift-giving caravan close to Christmas.



HALDIMAND—Archival photo of some of the many volunteers who contributed to the annual Santa to a Senior Haldimand program in its inaugural year, 2020. The program pairs participants

with local seniors to deliver personalized gifts to various locations within Haldimand County and Six Nations of the Grand River. —Haldimand Press archive photo.

The yearly initiative is spearheaded by the three-person team of Sarah Hague, Nicole Selby, and Melissa Burgess.

“The first year was a whirlwind fuelled by Facebook in the height of the pandemic,” said the trio. “Over the years we have expanded to include more facilities, as well as people in our community who are supported by assistance programs and individuals who are nominated for a variety of reasons.”

Sponsored by Winegard Motors in Caledonia, this year participants (or ‘Santas’) can browse through an Interactive Recipient List on the website.

“With a simple click they can pick their person, fill in their contact information, and an email is sent directly to the Santa with all the details. This has drastically streamlined our process and reduced the human workload and errors,” said the team.

They urged all interested to consider becoming a Santa. With over nine pages of registered names waiting to be matched to a caring community member, there’s a person for every Santa.

Personally, this reporter has been a Santa for the past three years, and has truly enjoyed hunting for gifts, delivering them to the drop-off, and knowing that someone out there got even just a tiny bit of joy from it. I sincerely recommend it to all.



One of the vehicles loaded with presents during last year’s Santa to a Senior festivities.

“The messages of thanks that we receive from the caregivers in the facilities and the recipients themselves are so heartwarming and inspire us to do more every year,” said the team. “Such small acts of kindness bring us so much joy. For example, we delivered a home cooked Christmas Dinner one time to a family who had no idea it was coming, and they were

overwhelmed with tears and gratitude. They couldn't believe someone would do this for them! So many of our recipients do not feel they are worthy of receiving something, and we are so happy to convince them otherwise."

The project comes with a gargantuan amount of work for the team each year, and you can help: "Right now we need help spreading the word about Santa to a Senior. Share our social media posts and help us recruit new Santas that can help fulfill all our wishes. We need Santas to donate either gifts or monetary donations to make sure no one is left out. We could really use a bulk items source to work with to increase our purchasing power."

They said the lower-than-normal uptake from the community this year has them a bit nervous, as there are so many signed up to receive a gift, and they know that with the financial impacts of inflation it's harder than ever for people to engage in charitable programs like theirs.

Now that care homes are not at the centre of the pandemic media spotlight, it can be easy to forget that those homes are still here, full of residents who may not have a family to visit over the holidays. A simple, thoughtful gift from a stranger could be the thing that makes their holiday memorable this year.

"The community spirit of working together for the benefit of others is so inspirational. To us this is really what the holidays are all about and we love giving these opportunities to families to share in this tradition. Many Santas tell us about how they get their kids involved from start to finish helping to teach the next generation about the generosity of giving ... and the joy that brings to your life," said the team.

For more details on Santa to a Senior, visit [santatoasenior.ca](http://santatoasenior.ca) and follow their page 'Santa to a Senior – Haldimand' for updates.

Gifts can be delivered to the Home Hardwares in Caledonia, Hagersville, Cayuga, and Dunnville between December 1-8, with the gift-giving parade on December 9.

The trio concluded, "It feels unbelievably amazing to be a part of this coordinated group effort to support the community. For an accidental start-up it really has come so far, and we are so proud of what it has become."

## **Mike Renzella**

After studying journalism at Humber College, Mike Renzella desired to write professionally but found himself working in technical fields for many years. Beginning in 2019 as a freelancer, he joined the team full-time later that year. Since then, Mike has won several awards for his articles thanks to his commitment to presenting an unbiased, honest look at the important news and events shaping our community.