

Santa to a Senior celebrates five years of generosity

by Mike Renzella
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HALDIMAND—This holiday season marks a milestone for Sarah Hague, Nicole Selby, and Melissa Burgess – the three-person team that organizes Santa to a Senior (S2S) each year to match local gift-giving elves with seniors living at care facilities throughout Haldimand and Six Nations.

S2S began during the first pandemic Christmas. Hague, looking for a way to do something for the local senior community who were isolated from their families, turned to Facebook to see who might be interested in rallying together to spread cheer. That initial outreach led to over 400 gifts distributed to seniors in an epic outpouring of generosity. Five years later, it has matured into an annual tradition embraced by the community.

“The pandemic really showed us that connection to others is quite possibly our most valuable resource as humans. Anyone who has spent some time volunteering or doing good for others will tell you that of all things in life this is what makes them feel the most fulfilled,” said Selby.



HALDIMAND—Pictured (l-r) are three of Santa’s most tireless helpers from Santa to a Senior: facilities and volunteer coordinator Melissa Burgess; founder and CEO Sarah Hague; and website and community content coordinator Nicole Selby.

The annual event takes a co-ordinated effort, particularly during tough times.

“The last couple years have been really tough for a lot of people. That usually means we have more people nominated to receive a gift (seniors) and less people able to purchase a gift (Santas),” said Selby.

That reality has led the team to adjust their approach, this year asking facilities to identify residents most in need to maximize the team’s impact.

Selby described last year’s campaign as a “whirlwind.... We were worried that it might be the first time we could not fill all the requests. But several local businesses stepped in to donate funds for us to purchase the items we needed and the day before delivery we were able to put together almost 150 gifts. That Christmas Magic worked to the success of our campaign once again.”

That co-ordinated effort begins in the fall with all LTC, retirement, and community support programs in Haldimand and Six Nations.

“We ask them to identify those who don’t have family or those going through a hard time,” said Selby. “The staff records their wish list and sends it to us to upload to our website so that people from the community can adopt one of these recipients and become their ‘Santa’.”

Using those details, participants are able to buy personalized gifts tailored to individual tastes. Those gifts are then dropped off at any of Haldimand’s four Home Hardware locations.

The real fun begins on December 7, when a small army of volunteers gather to load and distribute those gifts as a fun, festive parade to the various facilities.

“Santa to a Senior has come a very long way in five years! Year one happened in only two weeks almost entirely within Caledonia.... Year two introduced the specific wishes. Year three we introduced the website and expanded drop off sites.... Year four we upgraded the website so that the Santas could pick their own senior,” explained Hague. “And now year five, which includes both specific wish lists and generic gifts to accommodate the facilities that are not able to collect individual wishes. We have made new partnerships with local businesses to ensure we have the funds to get gifts to all our seniors.” Selby added, “Over the years the number of people we support has grown as more facilities and organizations realize how much a special gift can do for someone. The recipients are so touched by this gesture, and the Santas continue to tell us how meaningful it is for them to participate as well. One thing we know for sure is that everyone who participates receives some of that Christmas Magic in their lives.”

The bonds created through the yearly effort extend beyond the volunteers.

“The staff we work with welcome us back with excitement each year, our community partners feel like old reliable friends, and our Santas feel like a big community family,” said Selby.



HALDIMAND—Volunteers help deliver gifts during last year’s annual gift giving parade, the culmination of each year’s Santa to a Senior program.

She added the importance of those community partnerships has become central to S2S’ continued success: “From the logistical help of being drop-off locations to financial help, we truly couldn’t do it without them. Corporate donations have become really important for us.”

While all of this year’s eligible seniors have been matched to a Santa, those wishing to contribute can still do so by making a financial donation or by signing up to take part in the gift giving parade. Both can be done by visiting santatoasenior.ca.

Selby concluded, “The passion and dedication our community continues to bring to this initiative every year gives us the drive and the energy to keep building, improving, and growing this magical journey. We are beyond privileged and grateful to be a part of it, and proud to live in a place that takes care of each other like family.”



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.