

## Santa Cops Saves the Day

by Sandy Perlic

For many local families struggling to make ends meet, Christmas presents are a luxury they cannot afford. So in 1986, local law enforcement agencies banded together and formed Santa Cops with the goal of providing toys for these families. The non-profit reaches an ever-increasing number of children, with more than 3,500 kids in Larimer County receiving gifts last year.

Santa Cops' mission is simple: "This is about a child being able to have something new for Christmas," said Fort Collins police officer Dawn Johnsen, a Santa Cops board member. However, the benefit goes deeper than giving a gift to a needy child. Volunteers from local law enforcement deliver all of the gifts. "It's just a neat way to have people, both kids and parents, see police officers in a different light," Johnsen said.

To receive gifts, a parent needs to bring their child's birth certificate or social security card, along with a bill or other verification of their address, to one of Santa Cops' registration sites. Agency volunteers complete the application for the family. Johnsen has a simple formula for determining who will receive gifts: "If somebody needs help, and they ask, we help them," she said.

The organization would not be successful without the dedication of the staff and officers of its supporting agencies: the Colorado State Patrol, CSU Police Department, Fort Collins Police Services, Loveland Police Services, and the Larimer County Sheriff's Office. Johnsen estimates a couple of hundred officers are involved throughout the process of purchasing, wrapping and delivering the toys.

Santa Cops has also teamed with the Alternative Sentencing Unit in Larimer County. "They make us unbelievable wooden toys - from cradles to desks, tables and chairs - and we're able to give those wooden toys out also as gifts to kids," Johnsen said.

But a large part of Santa Cops' success relies on the generosity of local residents and businesses to meet the growing need for gifts. Each year, the community has rallied to support the agency by donating new unwrapped gifts or cash, participating in a wrapping session, and purchasing items offered at its annual auction.

The auction is the agency's primary fundraiser. This year, it will be held on October 20 at 6:30 p.m. at the Lincoln Center. Doors open at 6 p.m., and the \$5 admission allows attendees to bid on both the live and silent portions of the auction. Johnsen promises a variety of wonderful items to bid on. "Some unbelievable carpenters have made us some beautiful things, and those are the things we usually auction off," Johnsen said, mentioning chain-saw bears, trellises and bookcases as some of the many items craftsmen have provided for the sale. Sixteen gift packages - assembled into themes such as gardening, golfing, snowboarding, and boys and girls - will be among the items offered.

Johnsen has been involved with Santa Cops for the past eighteen years, and has participated on its board in almost every capacity. She was drawn to volunteer because of the opportunity to have positive interactions with the community, and still enjoys that aspect today. "It's just so nice to do that positive of making a child or a family happy at Christmastime," she said. "That's just a neat thing to get to do."

### Sidebar:

You can help by donating cash or a new unwrapped toy at any law enforcement office in Larimer County, or by mail to Larimer County Santa Cops, 2501 Midpoint Drive, Fort Collins, CO 80525.

You can apply to receive assistance for your family by bringing the required information to any of the following registration sites:

Loveland: Conference room at old Larimer County Courthouse building located at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Cleveland

Saturdays, November 10, November 17, December 1, December 8: 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Wednesdays, November 14, November 28, December 5: 1-5 p.m.

Fort Collins: Larimer County Courthouse Offices building at 200 W. Oak St.

Saturdays, November 10, November 17, December 1, December 8: 8:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.,  
Hearing room

Mondays, November 12, November 26, December 3: 9 a.m. - 4 p.m., Boyd Lake room

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