

Gifts of Hope: How can you help this Holiday Season?

By Christina Eckert, a staff member at Community Giving Tree

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It started with a high chair.

Driving through Boxford, Leslie Levenson saw a high chair on the side of the road with the trash cans, and thought to herself, "What a waste. There's got to be someone who needs that high chair." Most people would just keep driving and not give it a second thought. But Levenson talked it over with her women's group at the Second Congregational Church, and they challenged her to make it happen. Community Giving Tree was born.

At first, Levenson and co-founder Betty Obernesser collected used high chairs, cribs, strollers and other baby items in Levenson's garage, and hand-delivered them to children's agencies in Haverhill and Lawrence. Social workers told Levenson and Obernesser that the children they served also desperately needed basics such as clothes and diapers. The women got the word out to local preschools and elementary schools, and started collecting gently used clothes, sorting them by size and gender. Levenson developed the "Baby Bundle," a week's worth of clothes fastened in a bundle with a small toy on top so that it would look like a present to the child receiving it. When the Second Church purchased the Park House, adjacent to the church, Levenson persuaded church officials to let Community Giving Tree use the Park House's detached 2-car garage to store and distribute the items they collected. Soon they were collecting so many items that they couldn't deliver them all; so Levenson and Obernesser invited social workers to come to the garage and pick them up, one Tuesday per month.

Fast forward to 2011, and Community Giving Tree has come a long way from that high chair by the side of the road. The 2-car garage has been replaced by a 2-story Giving Center, which takes in hundreds of clothing donations every

year; in 2011 over 3,000 bundles of clothes, 172 cribs or pack and plays, 130 strollers, and of course, 101 high chairs. The network of social workers has grown to include over 400 caseworkers from 83 children's agencies throughout Essex County, from DCF to Catholic Charities to Greater Lawrence Family Health Care and more; now the Giving Center is open every Tuesday and Thursday, so that caseworkers can pick up items their clients need as soon as they need it. The number of clothing and equipment donations has grown, too, stretching to over 1500 community members who have contributed their outgrown clothing and baby items to the cause.

From the beginning, Levenson saw Community Giving Tree's mission as three-fold: 1) To provide struggling families with the clothing and safe baby equipment they need for their children; 2) To keep perfectly good clothing and baby items out of landfills; and 3) To educate families and children about local philanthropy, and show them how to make a difference in their own community.



A group of local girls got into the Spirit of Giving by making baby bundles of clothing, topped with toys.

The holiday festivities this month offer the perfect (and festive) way to join Community Giving Tree's mission. On Saturday, December 3, 10 am – 2 pm, when West Boxford Village

transforms into a Winter Wonderland, Community Giving Tree invites families to participate in their Spirit of Giving Workshop. Parents are invited to bring their children to the cozy new Giving Center, where Levenson will show them how to assemble gift packages for children in need. Community Giving Tree will supply the materials, although donations of travel-sized toiletries, gently used books and baby blankets are always welcome. "Children love to do kind things for kids their own age," Levenson says. "We don't have to explain much; they get it very quickly, and they want to help. Helping kids make gifts for other kids warms our hearts; children are our inspiration and our mission."

Community Giving Tree is also gathering items for their annual Holiday Giveaway of new items, so consider bringing new hats, mittens, socks, diapers, underwear, or pajamas. "The Holiday Giveaway means everything to families who have so little," says DCF caseworker Sheila Lynch. One of her clients, a single mother of three, has a medical condition which limits her ability to work. "Her needs are many, but her requests are basic: warm clothing, school supplies, toiletries. In the past Community Giving Tree provided these basics, plus Christmas gifts, for the children. Now the children are teenagers, and despite their own need, their mom instilled the spirit of giving in them; last Christmas they volunteered at a local food pantry. The gifts they received inspired them to give back."

Community Giving Tree's website, www.CommunityGivingTree.org, lists many other ways to join the Spirit of Giving. Children or adults can host a Care and Share Party, in which guests bring an item from the CGT wish list in lieu of gifts. Church or scout groups can make Friendship Boxes, which are wrapped shoe boxes filled with small gifts and necessities such as toiletries and socks. Groups can also package Warm and Cozy Bundles of socks, underwear, PJs, hats and mittens, and gently used stuffed animals. All of these items must be delivered to Community Giving Tree by December 10 for the Holiday Giveaway. Any organization can also run a Winter Coat Collection, collecting clean, gently used children's coats which will be distributed throughout the winter.

Children's needs are large and growing in today's economy – but so is the desire to meet those needs. That sad little high chair by the road inspired one person to help thousands; now hundreds of people can also help, whether it's by participating in the Spirit of Giving Workshop, by putting together gift bundles, or by dropping off gently used coats and clothing at the Community Giving Center. Community Giving Tree offers a simple way to help a neighbor in need; what better way to get into the spirit for the holidays?

For more information, visit www.CommunityGivingTree.org.