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The red kettle goes virtual

Anyone can feel the joy and satisfaction of helping others without having to leave the comfort of home.

LINDA LEICHT • NEWS-LEADER • NOVEMBER 29, 2008

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If you love the sound of coins falling into the Salvation Army Red Kettle, you can still find the kettles and bell ringers outside stores around the city this holiday season.



But the Salvation Army and other charities are offering new ways for donors to help the less fortunate during the holidays without having to visit the mall, collect canned goods or even write a check.

You can have your own online red kettle for the Red Cross, hold a virtual food drive for Ozarks Food Harvest, purchase gift donations from the alternative catalog for Rainbow Network, buy a night's shelter at the Springfield Victory Mission, order clothes for the Kids' Clothes Closet or adopt a horse at Therapeutic Riding of the Ozarks.

"For a number of years, we have said that the red kettle will eventually drift away," said Maj. Norman Grainger of the Salvation Army in Springfield.

With more people using credit or debit cards, fewer have cash to drop in the kettles, and the Internet is more often the shopping mall people are visiting.

"We would be foolish not to really tap into that," Grainger said.

Many Ways To Help

A recent survey for World Vision has shown that 71 percent of adults surveyed plan to spend less money on holiday presents this year, but 49 percent plan to give a charitable gift as one of those gifts.

Rainbow Network wants to provide a way to do that through its alternative gift catalog, said the Rev. Jim Oman with the Springfield-based outreach to the poor in Nicaragua.

"We're pretty excited about this," said Oman, who sees the effort as both a fundraiser and a way to get information out about Rainbow.

The catalog donations range from \$5 to buy school supplies for a child to \$200 to pay for cataract surgery or a \$300 share in a house. While the donations actually go into a general fund, the catalog gifts provide a tangible way that donors can see how their money is being spent.

Each gift can also be made in honor of someone donors select, and a card will be sent to that person telling them what their holiday gift will do for someone in Nicaragua.

If homelessness in the United States is your passion, you can go to the Victory Mission shopping cart online to "purchase" a GED class, a night's lodging at the shelter, an emergency food basket for a family or a share in Victory Wheels, a handicapped accessible bus.



Purchase this Photo

Michael Quin (right), a Salvation Army employee, holds the door open for shoppers (from left) Di Wang and Echo Zhao as he rings a bell next to the red donation bucket outside Dillard's at Battlefield Mall Monday afternoon. (Amber Arnold / News-Leader)

CHRISTMAS GIVING

If you are looking for an alternative gift this Christmas, check out these opportunities.

Salvation Army

- To donate to the Springfield Salvation Army online -- http://give.salvationarmyusa.org/site/TR?px=1345520&fr_id=1200&pg=personal

- To set up your own online Red Kettle -- www.onlineredkettle.com

- The Kitchen Inc. www.thekitcheninc.org

- Springfield Victory Mission

- www.victorymission.com

- Ozarks Food Harvest www.ozarksfoodharvest.org

- Council of Churches of the Ozarks www.ccozarks.org

- Rainbow Network www.rainbownetwork.org



This is what you will see when you start your own red kettle, which can be done by going to www.onlineredkettle.com. (give.salvationarmyusa.org)



"We try to break everything down to what it does," said Victoria Queen, director of Victory Trade School.

The shopping cart will be available Monday. If a donation is made as a Christmas gift, the recipient will get a card telling her about the gift.

"It's great for the person who has everything," said Queen. "For a \$100 donation, they could get a card saying 'You housed 100 people!'"

The Gifts from the Heart catalog of the Council of Churches of the Ozarks, gives shoppers an opportunity to buy clothes for the Kids' Clothes Closet -- a program that provides new clothes for foster children, said the Rev. Mark Struckhoff with Council of Churches of the Ozarks.

The Kids' Clothes Closet is a program through Ambassadors for Children, a project of the Council of Churches that supports foster families and children.

Connections Handyman Services, another council project, has a holiday gift idea for dancers, medical professionals, builders or anyone else who cares about the mobility and independence of people with disabilities.

A gift of \$189 will buy and pay for the installation of a handrail or grab bar in the home of a person with disabilities, and the donor will get a certificate to wrap for the honoree.

A special "Heart for Christmas" gift was created especially for the "Scrooge" at the office or the family or for a business associate or client, Struckhoff said. For a \$150 donation to Crosslines -- a Council of Churches project that provides emergency assistance to needy families -- the recipient will get a certificate telling them that a family in need received a Christmas food basket and toys for the kids in their honor.

Helping Children

Children are a central part of the holidays, so a recent report showing that the number of hungry children in the country is growing is particularly troubling, said Bart Brown, director of Ozarks Food Harvest.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that 691,000 children went hungry in America sometime in 2007, more than a 50 percent increase over the previous year. And the economic downturn this year is likely to make those numbers even higher in 2008, Brown said.

"This year, especially, it just doesn't feel right to go out and spend a bunch of money on Christmas gifts," Brown said of his own plans. "I think a lot of people are thinking the same way."

In order to provide people ways to put the food bank on their gift list, Ozarks Food Harvest has offered some giving opportunities.

Food is a big need during the holidays, and many families that are now jobless are turning to area food pantries and other feeding programs. A traditional way to respond to that need is through a food drive.

So the food bank is offering a virtual food drive that can be customized for individuals, groups, companies and churches.

"It's easy, fun and there are no cans to carry," Brown said.

Another online opportunity is the "Adopt a Backpack" program, which provides a backpack of food for a hungry child in an area school.

For a more hands-on giving opportunity, Brown recommends a food drive Christmas potluck. "Have your guests bring nonperishable food items instead of calorie-laden dishes or cookies, then bring the food to Ozarks Food Harvest," he suggested.

A tradition during the winter holidays has been the Check Out Hunger drive for the food bank. Local grocery stores will scan an extra dollar at checkout to give to Ozarks Food Harvest.



Purchase this Photo

Salvation Army employee Michael Quin rings a bell next to the red donation bucket outside Dillard's at Battlefield Mall. With the trend toward more online shopping, the days of the bell and bucket could be numbered. (Amber Arnold / News-Leader)

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More In Need

Kippie Kutz, director of development at The Kitchen Inc., has been looking for ways to support the rising number of families arriving at the shelter.

"The homeless population is growing and changing," she said. Many have full-time jobs or are going to college, yet this year they can't make ends meet.

There are generally 230 to 240 people staying at the Missouri Hotel, The Kitchen's emergency shelter for families and single women. Just before Thanksgiving there were 50 children in the shelter.

With every shelter facing the same pressures, this year The Kitchen has had a waiting list for the first time, Kutz said.

The Kitchen has turned to e-mail as a cheaper and greener way to connect with the community and tell people about the growing needs, she said.

The agency also has a MySpace page that sends visitors to its Web site, and plans a Facebook page soon.

Kutz finds that the Internet has opened a new source of support -- young people and students, even as young as elementary school, and their teachers.

"They know how important volunteering is, how much nonprofits depend on it," she said.

Kids Can Help, Too

Cutting out gifts for adults may be easy, but children often expect items under the tree and love to buy gifts for others.

Some charitable giving opportunities allow parents to help their children learn about philanthropy.

The Ozarks Food Harvest virtual food drive has pictures of food items on the Web site so kids can pick out their favorite foods to donate. It helps them learn about the value of giving and the cost of food, Brown said.

Schoolchildren can help a needy student through the Adopt a Backpack program and make the donation a gift to a friend or family member, he added.

At the Council of Churches of the Ozarks, one of its projects, Therapeutic Riding of the Ozarks, offers a gift every child would love -- a horse.

Forty dollars a month will feed and shelter a horse that is used in the program, which helps children who are physically or mentally disabled. In return for the donation, you get a certificate of adoption with a picture of the horse and visitation rights.

"It's a neat thing," said Struckhoff. "Kids love horses."

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