

# Holiday helpers: For volunteers, 'tis the season to assist the needy



Written by Town Crier Staff Report  
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Photo Elliott Burr/Town Crier

Marilyn Van Gastel, above, from left, Karen Quaid, Cindy Ma and Marlene Custer, volunteers at the Community Services Agency in Mountain View, help organize the non-profit's toy drive, which runs through Dec. 31.

provides social services to Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills residents – and she's showing no signs of letting up.

"I can't imagine not volunteering," Creger said. "It's got to be about the people. ... I'd so much rather be out here than at home cleaning or something."

Creger's work at CSA is hardly the only charitable thing happening there. In addition to its food program, CSA offers everything from toy donations to senior services and transportation, dental-care assistance and help for the homeless.

All available volunteer positions are filled this holiday season, according to Alison Hopkins, director of volunteering. That equates to nearly 600 long- and short-term helpers donating their time in various shifts and capacities to make ends meet at the agency.

"This year we're very lucky," Hopkins said.

Luck, however, finds a home elsewhere during the rest of the year. Call it a holiday-volunteering hangover or an economic downturn, but Hopkins said finding good help during nonholiday hours is where it gets tricky.

"During the holidays, it's never hard to find people to volunteer," she said.

And because more residents face dire financial straits, the agency has noticed an uptick in demand for its services.

During the holiday season, volunteers are the stuff that make the stuffing, the staff that stocks the shelves, the stars that sell the trees and the weavers of fine tales They are the faces that make Santa Claus seem real.

The Los Altos area is filled with such volunteers, who dedicate their time and skills to brighten the holidays for those in need.

CSA elves stock the shelves

Kathleen Creger diligently assists clients receiving donated food at the Community Services Agency in Mountain View, as a busy crowd browses produce-stocked shelves.

It's been nearly a decade since the Mountain View resident began volunteering at the non-profit – which



CSA's toy program, which takes donations from residents directly or from local fire stations' toy collections and allows parents to pick them up for their families, operates through Dec. 31. More than 200 families pick up toys each day.

Hopkins said she's looking for long-term volunteers to fill slots beyond Thanksgiving and Christmas. For more information, call 968-0836.

#### Top o' the tree volunteers

If a tree is on your Christmas list this holiday season, the proceeds from two volunteer-run lots benefit local children. The Kiwanis Club of Los Altos Tree Lot, a tradition since 1987, sells noble firs, wreaths, garlands and centerpieces.

The lot is the major fundraiser for the club's signature events, including the Los Altos Kiwanis Pet Parade and Kiwanis Special Games, and underwrites grants for children's programs and scholarships for first-time community college students.

With assistance from the De Anza Kiwanis Club, family and friends, Los Altos Kiwanis members donate approximately 660 hours selling trees, not including the hours of preparation.

"If it weren't for the countless hours that our volunteers donate to run this tree lot, we would not be able to raise the money needed for our scholarships, Kiwanis Special Games and other various grants," said Diana Ritter, volunteer coordinator.

Located in the Lucky's parking lot on Fremont Avenue at Arboretum Drive in Los Altos, the Kiwanis Tree Lot is open 3-7:30 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekends through Dec. 19.

The club always needs volunteers to help run the tree lot. For more information, e-mail Traci Hatling at [traci.hatling@yahoo.com](mailto:traci.hatling@yahoo.com).

For more information on Kiwanis, visit [www.losaltoskiwanis.org](http://www.losaltoskiwanis.org).

#### Student-athletes raise funds

Students and parents from Los Altos and Mountain View high schools are selling Christmas trees this year at a new location – El Monte Shopping Center at El Camino Real and El Monte Avenue in Mountain View.

Customers can direct a percentage of their purchase to the school, sport or organization of their choice; remaining proceeds benefit the sports teams and clubs at both schools.

Student-athletes and their parents are scheduled to donate 400-500 hours selling trees.

"The volunteers are absolutely critical," said Jerry Sorensen, who helps operate the tree lot. "We are able to serve more people and really provide the customer with a great experience."

Sorensen said the lot has become a social experience for the customers as well the volunteers.

For more information on volunteering at the lot, e-mail Pam Lytle at [pam.lytle@lmco.com](mailto:pam.lytle@lmco.com).

## The bell ringers

One of the first sounds heralding the arrival of the holidays is the Salvation Army bell ringer. The bell ringers are positioned at various street corners and outside busy stores to seek donations.

In Los Altos, bell ringers are stationed outside Starbucks on Main Street, Walgreens on Second Street and Safeway on First Street.

Salvation Army bell ringers and their iconic red kettles, which collect the donated dollars and coins, are found around the world. Contributions enable the organization to bring the spirit of Christmas to people often forgotten – the aged and lonely, the ill, the poor and disadvantaged, and inmates of jails and other institutions.

In the United States, the Salvation Army is reported to aid more than 6 million people at Thanksgiving and Christmas each year.

The red kettles appeared in 1891 when a Salvation Army captain in San Francisco wanted to provide a Christmas dinner for the area's poor but didn't know how to raise the money. From his days as a sailor in Liverpool, England, Capt. Joseph McFee remembered a large pot on a landing where passersby could toss donations. Local authorities granted McFee permission to place a pot on the ferry landing and in its waiting room.

More than a century later, the tradition endures, as people donate their time and money to make the red-kettle collections a success.

"It is fun to meet a lot of new people," said Terry Cress, manning a kettle outside Starbucks last week. "People are very generous."

Cress is one of many volunteers from Bridges Community Church in Los Altos, which oversees the kettle outside Starbucks.

"We have a lot of people signed up, but we are still looking for volunteers," said Ada Hau, who schedules volunteers through the church. "If the shifts aren't filled, we'll have to hire people for pay."

For volunteer information, contact Hau at 948-2778.

## Hospital helpers

It's a little late to set up and decorate the 16 Christmas trees that adorn the floors of El Camino's new main hospital and its buildings across its campus, but volunteer Auxiliary members have plenty to do in a facility that never closes.

For more than 50 years, Auxiliary volunteers have helped stretch staff services – from greeting visitors at the front entrance to escorting released patients to their vehicles to return home.

"The Auxiliary does it all," said Mariana Latham, Auxiliary president.

Laura Ferrari does what comes naturally for her – making people laugh. For eight months, Ferrari has traveled on weekends from her home in San Francisco to volunteer with the

Auxiliary's Therapeutic Humor and Music program. The hospital is home, of sorts – Ferrari was born there 23 years ago, and her father is an orthopedic surgeon there. When the entrance doors open, Ferrari is on the job.

"Pretty much, the volunteering starts as soon as I walk in the hospital doors," she said. "Everyone wants to talk with someone who's dressed as crazily as I am."

Dressed in the Auxiliary's official uniform – white pants, white polo and white shoes – and a multicolored tutu, something humongous and colorful highlighting a fun hairdo and light clown makeup, Ferrari's aim is to lighten people's moods.

"The goal is just to have fun in a sterile and boring environment," she said.

The rule: The bed curtain must be open and patients awake before Ferrari asks if she can step in. Once in, she asks if she can take another step in – "How about a couple more?" Ferrari focuses on their moods, responding in kind to match their emotions.

"Most are interested in watching me act like they are," she said. "It makes them smile."

And it lightens the mood in an otherwise stressful circumstance. During the seasonal celebrations, Ferrari knows her work is that much more important.

"I definitely understand that the holidays are lonely in the hospital," she said.

It's the cold weather during the holidays that ensures El Camino's patients will appreciate the gifts Coco Bonneville creates volunteering with the Auxiliary's Pinkies and Hooks & Needles programs.

The Pinkies make comfort pillows for patients, while Hooks & Needles volunteers knit or crochet baby hats for newborn infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, hats for cancer patients, and caps, shawls and lap robes for oncology patients.

Bonneville began volunteering in 2004 after heart problems landed her at El Camino. Living in Los Gatos with weekly blood tests scheduled in Mountain View, Bonneville said, "There must be something I can do besides get my blood checked. That's how I got started with the Pinkies."

Volunteer activities expanded from the Pinkies to Hooks & Needles, which meets each Wednesday to weave yarns –woolen and oratory. Through the years, Bonneville estimates she's created more than 1,000 items for babies in intensive care or oncology patients undergoing chemotherapy in cold rooms.

For more information, call 940-7215 or visit [www.elcaminohospital.org](http://www.elcaminohospital.org).

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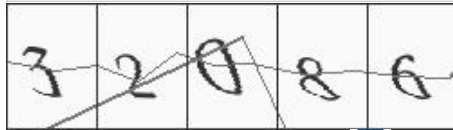
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