

9th Day of Christmas

Happy New Year! Today Valerie Poulin shares her personal experience with charitable giving during the holidays. A frequent contributor to Bread 'n Molasses magazine, Valerie is a published book author and an internationally published poet. She writes magazine features, news, profiles, and general-interest articles. Enjoy!

Giving in the Spirit of Christmas

By Valerie Poulin

Giving in the spirit of Christmas, honouring personal heroes, paying it forward—it doesn't matter what you call it, the important thing is action.

In past years, after writing cheques of small, seemingly inconsequential amounts, to my favourite charities, I felt guilty and somewhat lame for not having donated more. What I decided would work was to stop sending little bits of money to five or more charities, I decided to focus on only three charities, on a rotating basis so that six charities received money every other year.



What I learned this season is that \$25 or \$50 can make a difference. But there were other lessons found in the phrase “the spirit of giving.”

This year, thanks to my mother and late grandmother, not only was I inspired to do something bigger and better, I was also allowed to play Santa. I was able to purchase almost \$500 worth of gifts to donate to a local women’s shelter.

(As I mentioned to a friend, I had a hard time convincing myself that Grandma would have wanted me to spend 500 bucks on a Wii for my 12-year-old.)

While I don’t want to give undue credit, I can’t overlook the coincidence, or perhaps more accurately, the synchronistic airing of The Oprah Winfrey Show’s “[Paying It Forward](#)” episode followed by [CNN’s Heroes](#). Watching these shows, I was reminded of a workshop I’d attended a year ago with parole officers and social workers from across Canada, to learn about the therapeutic writing work of regional writer [Sue Reynolds](#) for incarcerated women, but I hadn’t taken what I’d learned beyond the planning stage. What’s more, I’d also been recently introduced to the work of a Toronto-based, hands-on charity that allowed donators to give gifts requested by needy children. Reminders were everywhere, things were adding up. I wanted to do more.

Days later a cheque arrived from my mother. She’d evenly divided her portion of Grandma’s tiny estate to her four daughters and sent out cheques in time for Christmas shopping.

I knew, almost instantly, what I would do with the gift.

It much wasn’t much of a leap of imagination. The money was meant to be passed along.

Here was the sign I’d been waiting on. My grandmother, who spent many of her 104 ½ years volunteering for church groups, contributing hand-made crafts to local fundraisers, and knitting hats and mittens for the homeless, was allowing me, through my mother’s actions, to make a

gesture that I'd always wanted to make. I was able to give big.

I called a local shelter to find out what they needed beyond the list on their website. How many kids were staying at the shelter and of what ages? With a substantial employee discount for a retail store, I could spend the \$500 and get about \$650 worth of merchandise. It wasn't long into the conversation before I realized how out of touch I am with the reality of these women's lives.

In my zeal to make a difference, to buy special gifts for the residents and their families, I overlooked the obvious. These are women in need. They are women who have left abusive familial situations.

Cosmetics and fragrances were on my list. Is makeup needed? I asked. Mascara? Eyeliner? Lipstick? "Yes," the volunteer co-ordinate said, then paused. "And concealer ... sometimes there's bruising."

The difference between my desire to help and the harsh truth of their lives was wholly evident.

Not only did the gravity of this reality stop me in my tracks, but I realized that I was being selfish. I'd approached this gift-giving experience as my contribution, of me, helping. The focus and attention was meant to be on the women and their families.

After all, this wasn't about changing lives—the staff at the shelter do that. The women themselves take steps to change their lives. My gesture was a simpler one. Adding brand new, store-bought items to the season's donations of gently-used clothing and second-hand toys, the gifts were meant as a reminder for the women of their worth, of the special place they hold in their world, and to demonstrate some humanity to the children, to show them that the world can be gentle and kind and caring, something they may not have yet experienced in their young lives.

Although the gesture itself was big for me personally, it didn't have to be. It's the fulfillment that's immense, not the size of the contribution. This year, I gave to an organization I cared deeply about, rather than spreading it across many charities. And that made a world of difference to me.

In organizing the dozen or so bags of loot, I thought about the joy Grandma must have experienced when knitting those hats and mitts, knowing that she was helping someone, even in a small way.

It must have been similar to the joy I was experiencing.

And recognizing that I would not have been able to experience that joy, to make the donation without my late grandmother's gift, I offered the contribution to the shelter in her memory. I think she would have liked that.