

Bringing joy to others with the Power of H.O.P.E.

by Mike Robinson



PENNY JAMIESON, JANICE WILSON AND FRIENDS

"In doing this we have discovered just how desperate the situation is ... right in our own backyard. Many of the women who go to women's shelters have nothing but their children in their arms and the clothes on their backs."

Janice Wilson

ARTHUR - Readers might think this is a fluff piece - and it is - about fluffy critters and two women giving their hearts to the community through the power of hope.

For Penny Jamieson and Janice Wilson it is a bit like Christmas all year round as they work to bring a bit of joy into other lives.

Sitting at the kitchen table with Jamieson and Wilson recently, their excitement and enthusiasm was readily apparent.

From the tone of their voices to the sparkle in their eyes as they talked about their hobby/mission/obsession, they full well know the Power of H.O.P.E. (Helping Other People Everyday).

Christmas is a time for giving and helping other people in need, but Jamieson and Wilson make it a year-round endeavor. One such campaign includes a stuffed toy drive to put a smile on young children's faces at Christmas

"We invite residents to help collect clean, good conditioned, stuffed toys to be given to our local charities for Christmas," Jamieson said "Christmas is a time for giving and to help others in need. Our local charities need help to make a child's Christmas more memorable."

This year's goal is to collect 2000 stuffed animals by November.

They have also created memory books full of letters, cards, and photographs that outline the progression of their projects.

"When I talk about this, we both have a very deep passion for what we do," Jamieson said. "It started with Hurricane Katrina. As we worked at that, it took us six weeks to complete from start to finish."

That resulted in a cargo container of materials being shipped to the people recovering in the storm's aftermath.

"It was very rewarding, being able to help total strangers," Jamieson said.

Wilson added, "Penny Jamieson and I first got to know each other while collecting necessities for the people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. In the end, we sent half of a 53 foot trailer to New Orleans. Everything was sorted, labeled and boxed."

Then, years had passed, and she was at a mall and saw one of the Christmas trees with names on it. She and Wilson had similar experiences, using that venue to purchase toys for a child. Then Jamieson

thought, for the same amount of money as spent on that toy, she could go around to yard sales and find more stuffed toys for more children. "I felt that the money could go a longer way to help out."

She enrolled Wilson a few years ago for that new work.

Wilson focuses on Arthur because she doesn't drive a car, so she rides her bicycle from yard sale to yard sale. "I go down the street with the bicycle carrier filled with toys," Wilson laughed.

Jamieson said "All I need to do is asked Janice about one idea, and she talks to people in Arthur through her connections ... and it just snowballs."

Two years ago, they decided to work on the toys. They collected 325 of them and divided them among the Centre Wellington Resource Centre and the Salvation Army, in Guelph. In describing the subsequent year, Wilson said, "It kind of exploded. We did about 1,500 toys as well as some pajamas. There's a dire need for low income families and single mothers, for slippers and even blankets."

That launched yet another campaign, called Sweet Dreams ... which is tied in with their other campaigns. It asks others to help collect preferably new pajamas, slippers, and blankets for all age groups of children, women, and men for local charities this Christmas. The goal is to have everyone warm and cozy this winter season - so they can have sweet dreams.

Donations from their endeavours cover more than just the local area - and have spread from northern Wellington County to Centre Wellington, Guelph, and Kitchener agencies. Last year, some of the places Jamieson and Wilson made donations to included:

- Guelph - The Children's Foundation, Michael House, Women's Shelter, Food Bank;
- Mount Forest - Women in Crisis, Big/Little Sisters, Pentecostal Church, Christmas Hampers;
- Kitchener - Saint Monica's House, K-W Counselling, Mosaic Counselling;
- Fergus - food bank; and
- Arthur - Christmas hampers.

Jamieson belongs to two

networking groups GWIN (Guelph Women in Networking) and the Kitchener-Waterloo POWE (Power of Women Exchange) chapter. Those connections, help further the work.

"We circulated a flyer asking for donations of good, clean used toys," she said. "I've talked to several people through thrift stores to pick up some toys for what we do."

By then, she had 2,000 toys in her home and started calling various agencies to donate them to. Last year, they collected 80 pairs of slippers, but at this point have collected roughly double that amount. The toys, however are not just collected and set aside to be donated.

"We clean them up as needed. I vacuum them. I also sell air purifiers so I put them in a box with an air purifier to sanitize them. Then we add new ribbons to them, to match the toy's personality," Jamieson said.

At that point, they put the toy

with a pair of pajamas and package it.

Jamieson joked that they had intended to take January and February off. "But it didn't quite work out."

Already their homes are quickly filling up with stuffed toys to refurbish and clean.

Why do they do it? In short, Jamieson said "We both want to give back to the community."

Part of it was due to a reflection of the work done following Hurricane Katrina, Jamieson said local people outdid themselves helping out total strangers.

Wilson added residents from the Arthur area really helped her when she had her surgery.

As to how the donations are received, "Response from agencies receiving the items, has been awesome" said Jamieson.

She brought out numerous letters from those receiving donations. One of those letters, forwarded from Mosaic

Thank you so much for your wonderful donation to the Rural Women's Support Program. The stuffed animals that you so thoughtfully picked out, cleaned and decorated brought a big smile to the faces of the women and children that received them. There are not a lot of resources to assist families for Christmas in the county so every little bit helps. I also appreciated how you checked in with me first to assess the needs of the women and children who we serve. ... You're amazing! It's great to see how much you clearly enjoy doing what you do.

Kate Crozier
Rural Support Counselor,
Rural Women's Support Program, Mount Forest

Counselling in Kitchener, was from a woman with four children who had just left an abusive spouse and was struggling to get back on her feet.

"Just knowing that I am receiving this much needed this Christmas help allows me to focus on my family and take comfort in the knowledge that this world is filled with many wonderful people willing to help out a complete stranger. Please know that I am extremely touched for your help and will be forever grateful."

Jamieson said for the most part, she and Wilson pay for most of the toys and supplies. This is a personal mission, and not a registered charity, so they can ask the public only for donations.

However, Jamieson cited numerous examples of generosity from local businesses and individuals. Those have included donations of items or substantial discounts, which, in turn, allow them to help more people. In one instance, Jamieson was in Guelph and given a large bag of ribbon that wasn't selling because it was too small. With what they do refurbishing the toys, "We need a lot," she said, laughing.

That same date, she stopped into a Fergus business, and, after explaining what they were trying to accomplish, she was invited to get what she needed.

"I came back with an armful of pajamas and he gave me a very generous deal. I wish there was more people like that. That started us off really nicely for this year's efforts."

Jamieson said pajamas are not just for moms, but teenage kids, and even men's for low-income families.

A lot of the donations will be heading to the women's shelters she added.

This year, they plan to expand their efforts.

"We're looking for new ... or very gently used items ... but the preference is for new. The toys can be gently used."

Through her other connections she is helping to raise funds for housing for the homeless - which leads to another idea she is working on, creating gift baskets for those involved in the supportive housing units. "We're trying to get donations of toiletries, new towels and face cloths."

Other needed items include socks, slippers, diapers, and baby blankets. The one thing they cannot offer is tax receipts, because "We're not registered. It's just the two of us that do this."

Another project, they are working on is the collection of milk bags, with the help of Arthur Public School. Even there, it is the outer bag only. They are taken to an individual in Guelph who cuts them into strips, and those are

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cheted into mats, which are then sent to Haiti or Africa.

"I know for a fact they are being used, because a lady at Liquidation World informed her a customer who had just returned from Haiti had seen where the mats were used in the hospitals, and in tents as beds," Jamieson said. "We're reusing, recycling, and not putting it into the landfills. I have Arthur Public School collecting right now."

She hopes to get other schools involved. "I'm hoping that the community will help us ... somehow."

Wilson added the church really helps a lot.

Bea Little, in Arthur, has offered to help sew pajamas, and Wilson added quite a few people have just brought in donations. She has come home on occasion to find big bags of toys sitting at her front door.

Jamieson said before making donations to some agencies, she had to prove the items were of good quality. "I went into a meeting and took 20 toys. Nineteen were gently used and one was brand new. As I was doing my presentation, they could not tell which was new and which was used."

She added, "I'm all for helping other countries, but there's a lot of people in our own backyards who need a lot of help. There's a lot of people here who need a little extra help and we're willing to do the work."

Jamieson added "I was a single mom at one time and I had a difficult time. This just works, and I'm able to do it now. I couldn't before, but I can now."

She believes the more awareness there is of the campaign, the more they can accomplish.

Wilson said she and Penny know all about tough times.

"At one point in her life, Penny found herself a single mom with three small children."

"And when I was growing up, we had a lot of winters where Dad had no work. Also in 2001-02, I found myself out of work, and for five months I had no income. The mission is very uplifting for us as well as being a real eye-opener. In doing this we have discovered just how desperate the situation is for some families, many right in our own backyard. Many of the women who go to women's shelters have nothing but their children in their arms and the clothes on their backs."

The pair also want to reach out more, to Clifford and Harriston, Erin, Palmerston, and Elmira.

For more information contact Penny Jamieson at 519-848-2561 or Janice Wilson at 519-848-2592 or email penny@freshairliving.com.

On behalf of Mount Forest Pentecostal Church, I want to say a huge thank you for your donation of Teddy Bear toys for our community Christmas banquet this year. Because of your donation, we were able to provide a toy, along with a stocking full of goodies, to every child under the age of 12 who attended our banquet. It was so exciting to see their little faces light up with excitement at the joy of receiving a special toy and stocking for Christmas.

I know first hand, that for some of the children, this was their only gift they would receive for Christmas. Thank you for the work you do in collecting these toys throughout the year.

Pastor Scott Lockwood
Mount Forest Pentecostal Church