

Believe Bags ?make a woman feel great about herself?

By Tabitha Wells

With Christmas comes the sparkling lights and decorations, along with music that warms the heart, and the spirit of giving that touches many throughout the season.

It is also the time of year that brings with it the reminder that not all are as fortunate as everyone else.

While there are many outreach programs, charities and fundraisers designed to help those facing financial, health and other struggles during Christmas, the unfortunate truth is that amidst everything, some are overlooked.

Last Christmas, one woman found herself noticing the lack of awareness surrounding the needs of single moms during the holidays.

"I went different places and I saw Toys for Tots and I saw Christmas Hampers for Grandparents and all kinds of Toy Drives and coats for everybody but single moms," explained Orangeville resident Karen Ross-Smith. "I thought to myself, "What do the moms do when they're scurrying to get gifts for their kids and everything and no one is looking after them?"

It was then that Ross-Smith developed the idea for Believe Bags ? bags filled with things that women enjoy, but those facing a difficult time might not be able to afford.

It wasn't due to past experience in such a situation that drew her to the idea, but rather the exact opposite.

She explained that she had been pretty blessed in her life and had not had to endure any hardships, which led to realizing that someone needed to do something for these women who did.

"I believe in paying it forward," she added. "I asked girlfriends and family members, since this was only a few weeks before Christmas, instead of doing a Secret Santa when we all got together, if they would give into these bags.?"

The idea was to gather items that those in a stronger financial situation take for granted, such as makeup, candles, magazines; things that are more of a luxury to those on a low income, but could help those women feel more confident and better during their hard times.

Even with the short notice last year, Ross-Smith was able to gather enough belongings to provide a bag for each woman at Family Transition Place. Between friends and other good Samaritans, enough items were collected to make sure that no-one went without. "My daughter took one of the bags to Westside last year, where she attends high school, and one of the teachers left on his lunch that day," she shared. "He filled the bag with a Cosmo (Cosmopolitan) magazine, candles, nice shampoos, nice lotions, a gift card, nail polish, nail polish remover ? all kinds of things that were exactly the stuff I was looking for.?"

This year, the plan has been to spread the message and be able to collect enough items to not only provide bags for women at Family Transition Place, but to have enough for women reached through Hospice Dufferin as well.

It started with asking friends and family to provide donations for the Believe Bags rather than presents at her 50th birthday celebration in October. Her brother-in-law did the same earlier in the summer, and combined they raised \$1,000 toward purchasing items for the bags.

"With that cash, I gave it to Rosemary at Odds and Errands, and she has taken the money to go shopping for me," said Ross-Smith. "My girlfriends, my family and my friends have all been amazing, dropping things off and donations at my birthday party, and this Christmas in the next few weeks, we'll get together and fill the bags.?"

Currently, there are four collection bins set up around the Orangeville area for people who want to drop off donations. Ross-Smith set up a basket at the Black Birch Restaurant on Hockley Road, where she works, as well as The Body Bar, Jody's Flair for Hair and at her husband's workplace, Highland Restorations.

"People have been dropping off all kinds of donations ? hair products and that sort of thing," she said. "We may end up with more than 50 bags, and if we do, the rest will be sent over to the Food Bank and they can get looked after there.?"

There has also been a strong response through the Facebook page she set up, with ladies from outside the Orangeville area expressing interest in helping out. One woman from Barrie contacted Ross-Smith through the page to let her know how touched she was by the idea because the concept hit home for her.

"She sent me a message saying, "Oh you have no idea how much that would benefit women," she explained. "She shared that 17 years ago she found herself in the same situation and said how much it would have meant to get something like that at Christmas. She said she and her children would be coming down from Barrie with some donations.?"

Another lady from Newmarket committed to mail 50 items to Ross-Smith at her workplace and several clients of Highland Restorations agreed to match some of the donations with an equal amount of items.

"I have already unloaded a full basket from my husband's business, and I've unloaded a full basket from the Black Birch restaurant," she added.

The donation baskets will be out until Dec. 15, and people interested in helping out can either drop their items off at any of the four locations or contact Ross-Smith through her Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/beliebagsorangeville>
?Believe Bags are just really to make a woman feel great about herself, to provide her with things that we take for granted,? said Ross-Smith. ?They're to make women believe in themselves, in Santa and in a little magic.?