

## Counting ? and distributing ? our blessings

**By Brock Weir**

The holiday season is in full swing.

The decorations line our streets. Santa has come through to give a teaser of things to come ? and, of course, take more than a few wish lists from kids who were able to safely get up close to the jolly man in red.

Office Christmas parties, for better or worse, have either already happened or are just on the cusp of rolling out. If you've got a gift list from family members, you've probably checked it twice, and have found the time to scratch a few items off while the going is good.

If you go in for such things, the tree has likely been up for at least a couple of weeks while the more proactive among us already have a few bits, baubles and knick-knacks wrapped, bowed, labelled ? works of art, taped up with love, all ready to be torn open by Christmas morning.

As we go around admiring the decorations, municipal Christmas trees, and the dazzling lights and decorations festooned on our neighbours' homes ? or, at least, the ones that were festooned before Saturday's windstorms; as we watched Santa ride out of Town on his way back to the North Pole to finish up his mysterious work in time for Christmas; as we safely stumble back from the office parties, out of practice from last year's hiatus; as we brave the onslaught of humanity at malls, if shopping local for the odd item is simply not possible; and as we sit around the tree admiring the handiwork of our more creative and visually-talented family members, we're all hoping for a return to some degree of normalcy.

For many of us, this will be the first time since 2019 we have celebrated the holiday season beyond the family members outside of our late, lamented bubbles. We're looking forward to seeing the smiles on the faces of loved ones in-person as they open up their gifts, when doing so over Zoom last December left more than a little to be desired. We're looking forward to breaking the proverbial bread sitting around a table groaning with some of our festive favourites. We're looking forward to relaxing after the meal, perhaps talking about our hopes and dreams for the year ahead. And although we're probably not looking forward to contending with the mess left over at the end of Christmas Day, Boxing Day, or whenever you're able to celebrate, there will be some degree of satisfaction in a job well done.

Of course, we're all hoping for the best as new cases of COVID-19 continue to ramp up.

We might be rethinking the guest list to keep numbers safe and manageable.

We might be climbing up the family tree to see who is and who isn't vaccinated to see who's welcome in an effort to minimize any risk as we return to gatherings.

We might be mulling alternatives to the traditional family gatherings once again, looking for options a little warmer and more meaningful than talking to each other from the confines of a Brady Bunch-esque square on a computer screen or tablet.

In short, we're doing our damndest to make the best out of an uncertain situation.

Despite the emergence of the Omicron variant, we deserve a safe bit of happy. We've earned it. It took a lot to get to this point. But we also have to remember that having these problems to ponder and sort out is, in its own way, a privilege.

It's an uncomfortable reality that compiling a gift list might be beyond the wildest imaginations of some members of our community. A table laden with a traditional Christmas dinner might only be something to reminisce about.

Keeping at least a fraction of the magic alive with family, friends, and loved-ones online simply isn't an option for community members for whom their only access to our online world is a pre-booked hour or two at a well-worn computer at a public library. These family, friends, and loved ones, to some, might be ghosts of distant memories, either long-since departed or out of touch for any variety of reasons.

Thankfully, we also live in a community that takes the season of giving well-beyond the confines of our own circles.

This is a time of year when organizations go above and beyond to ensure the magic of the holidays can be experienced by everyone, regardless of their means. They take the time to compile lists that some families wouldn't even dream of drafting. They pool their resources to plan dinners and fellowship for people in shelters, transitional situations, or would otherwise be spending Christmas at home alone, more often than not rejecting any suggestion of shining a light on their good works ? and certainly not in the pages of a newspaper. They mobilize their communities to buy a little extra when they go to the grocery stores, collect the items, and quietly deliver them to area food banks and like organizations.

And, even if it is an individual taking a single can of soup to groups serving those in need, or whatever is in their personal budget to spare, these small acts add up to something much larger, and something we can not only be proud of but be a part of as well.

With just over a week until Christmas, there is no shortage of ways to discover how you can have an impact, and there is no shortage of ways to put this impact into action.

But here too COVID has had an impact.

It seems from my own observation that in addition to donating anonymously to food banks, shelters, and charities, with your contributions distributed to those of highest need with equal anonymity, a certain degree of pre-existing shyness has been rubbed away over the course of the pandemic.

Neighbours have less hesitation sharing stories of need from their own neighbourhoods, personal stories of struggles, of lost jobs, of local families unable to make ends meet for the first time for any variety of reasons. Essentially, it's a matter of putting a face to where your contributions might be going.

But, more often than not, people are still uncomfortable doing so.

Whether it's a call out to the community over social media, or even a Go Fund Me campaign, there is admittedly some degree of gratification to know exactly how your donations are making an impact, but it is important to also remember that for every loud voice in the community, organizations are serving those who, for whatever reason, are either hesitant or unable to speak up on their own behalf.

It might be a busy season for all of us, but we can't let them get lost in the shuffle.