





It's time to

help the helpers

Gift program for foster children needs assistance this year

By Toni Leland

Last year, 400 foster children had a Christmas. Or a Thanksgiving dinner or a birthday. Or went to camp or joined a Scouting group, thanks to a local nonprofit organization known as Kinship 4 Kids.

The driving force behind this generosity are Linda Cote and her daughter, Shirley McGuigan. Cote manages Kinship4Kids, and also wears many of the organization's hats. Fifteen years ago, McGuigan started the group, helping about 20 children, and Cote joined the forces two years later.

"I started while I was still working for AT&T," says Cote. "After I retired, I continued because the organization had grown so quickly that my daughter couldn't handle it."

Cote's big heart sees children who require help in many facets of their lives. She really digs down to find out what it is. "They need somebody who cares," she says. "Somebody who pays attention to what they want and will open their hearts and mind."

The money is not always available to help, so Cote goes out into the community to look for it. "I'm not proud. I'll ask anyone to donate something," she

fall 2017 7

says. "I say if they don't have money to donate, what else could they do for these children?"

The communities seem to rally to the cause, providing donations like bicycles, Christmas trees, hand-knitted hats, gloves, and scarves, and money to purchase toys and warm coats for winter. Cote's reach runs north of Norwich to Willimantic and south all the way to Pawcatuck. "I find kids everywhere that need help, and families that don't have money to buy anything for their kids," she says.

But the bottom line is: the helpers need help to make this year as successful and joyful as those in the past. This year, the organization will be down by about \$5,000 due to the termination of the huge yard sales that Cote ran to raise money. Back surgery left her unable to manage the massive events, so now she's trying to make up the difference. Christmas boxes

are placed at key locations, and coin boxes are available at the Uncasville American Legion hall and Diane's Bait Shop in New London. Merchants help out, and organizations like the Waterford Speedbowl have fundraiser events. But it isn't always enough.

Needy children are identified through the Department of Children & Families (DCF), then Cote sets about gathering things those children want or need. "I take those big brown paper bags for leaves and fill them completely full of gifts. One for each child on my list," says Cote. "In addition to the items they listed as wanting, they might also get a coat, boots, hat, mittens, games, puzzles, things for school."

After the bags are delivered, there are always things left over. Cote contacts other organizations in the area that help local children, and invites them to come take the items for their own programs.

The program is a huge amount of work, and Cote has help from her husband, Paul, who does all the loading, driving, and delivery as well as polishing up donated bicycles. Cote's son, Mark, and her two daughters, Debbie Harmon and Cindy Cote, also pitch in to help with this worthwhile cause.

Cote's voice chokes a little. "I'm trying hard to give these foster kids something they wouldn't have, and help them be successful. It's a tough situation to be in, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to help somebody."

Any big hearts out there who would like to help this worthwhile program can contact Linda J. Cote at 860-334-0105 or lindajcote@gmail.com; monetary donations can be mailed to 70 Pruett Place, Oakdale, CT 06370. The website is www.kinship4kids.org

