

# SOS Insights

*from my desk to your heart*

For most people in the mid-Island area, the program that immediately springs to mind when asked about the Society of Organized Services is our annual holiday fundraising campaign, now called [Caring for Community at Christmas](#).

This program ensures that local children and youth have a special gift waiting under the tree for them on Christmas morning, and that families and individuals can enjoy food that is important to them over the holidays. It's a simple concept that has the power to create magic in both the heart of the giver and in the hopeful heart of the recipient. And it's a program with deep roots.

I'd like to take you on a trip down memory lane about the very first SOS Christmas program. For some of you who are long-time residents, you'll likely remember it well. And for newcomers to our region, I hope you'll find this little bit of history a meaningful example of the heart of our area.



*SOS Founding Member Pauline Touzeau sorting cans for the very first SOS Christmas program in 1968.*

Like many SOS programs, our Christmas program began small. The ink was barely dry on the SOS articles of incorporation when a tiny group of volunteers was asked to take over the annual Christmas hamper program. The Department of Welfare requested that SOS take on the project to prevent overlapping among various groups in the community. Thus became the SOS credo that has remained to this day – to avoid duplication by filling the gaps when other help is not available.

**The first Christmas hamper fund was held in December 1968 and raised approximately \$475** in cash donations, \$200 of that in collection jars in local businesses. It was estimated that well over \$100 in food, candy, hazelnuts, and walnuts were also donated and distributed to people in the Parksville area.

**In the second year of the campaign, SOS raised \$613** for the hamper fund and by the third year SOS was asked to expand distribution to Qualicum Beach and surrounding area. This made SOS the go-to organization across the entire district for managing Christmas donations and distribution of goods to those in need. A total of \$1,000 was raised in 1970.

Over the years, as the needs grew, SOS grew with them. By 1973, we adopted a new distribution method. Instead of hampers, gift certificates for groceries were given to families so they could buy food that was meaningful to them during the holidays, a practice we have continued to this day.

As the years went by, the number of families served and the donations to support them continued to increase. The impact on the lives of those in need was dramatic. Take June for instance (*her name has been changed to protect her identity*).

When June was a child, there was very little money for food or the basic necessities. Certainly, there was nothing extra for Christmas. One year, her mother told her and her two brothers not to put their stockings out in case Santa didn't make it. June's mom decided to reach out to SOS for help. She remembered asking for simple things like a baby doll, skipping rope, or colouring book. *"I didn't need much. I was so thankful to have a couple of things under the tree; otherwise, we literally wouldn't have had anything"* she said.



*A clipping from the local newspaper of the SOS Toy Shop and volunteer Norah Stone in 1982.*

Another SOS client remembers when SOS helped her get back on her feet. Many years ago her three children were filled with hope that their Christmas wishes would come true, but she had her doubts. *"I started out poor and very destitute, not knowing how I was going to keep the roof over my head, let alone raise three babies that wanted Christmas,"* she recalls.

She worked hard at minimum wage jobs that didn't pay enough to keep her and her family afloat while also having to deal with domestic abuse. One year her pre-teen daughter really wanted a makeup kit. *"She said, 'I only want this one thing, and it's only like twenty-five dollars,' but to me that was like a million dollars."*

She accessed the SOS Christmas program that year and will never forget when she saw a makeup kit in the SOS Toy Shop with several brushes and palettes of different colours of makeup, everything that her daughter had been dreaming of. *"It was the one things she wanted for Christmas – and it was there."*

**Fast forward to 2003**, when we started the Angel Tree program as a way to help fill the SOS Toy Shop with popular gifts. The way it works is that local businesses and organizations hang angel ornaments on their Christmas trees with specific gifts listed on the backs. People then purchase the gift listed and return the angel to the store, and volunteers pick up the gifts and take them to the Toy Shop. Over the years, these Angel Tree businesses have provided thousands of in-demand gifts for the program. We are grateful that this tradition still continues today.

**Then in 2008**, Paul Drummond, the General Manager of Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort, assembled his team to organize an annual Toy Drive at the resort benefitting the SOS Christmas program.

It's become a tradition for many residents to attend the annual event where Tigh-Na-Mara provides a free breakfast when guests bring in a toy or financial donation. Although this year's toy drive looked different because of the pandemic, residents were still able to participate by bringing in a donation to Cedars Restaurant from Nov 2-24, and receiving a free Traditional Breakfast. Tigh-Na-Mara also donated \$10 of every Traditional Breakfast sold during that time period, and staff at the resort donated 16 bikes.



*Children admire the toys donated to SOS through the Tigh-Na-Mara Toy Drive a few years ago.*

Our Christmas program has also evolved over the years to incorporate many other initiatives and local collaborations such as working with the Newcomers' Clubs to deliver stuffed Christmas stockings to seniors who are shut in or without close friends or family. And we've been the recipient of funds that local residents and organizations have raised on our behalf to benefit residents in need at Christmas.

**Now, fast forward to 2020** and the year when COVID-19 has impacted us all. It has not only changed the way we do things, but it's also changed the way we see things. No longer can we think that poverty is something that only happens to other people. We see that it can truly happen to anyone.

We are so grateful to have such a generous community that has faithfully supported our Christmas program for more than 50 years. In fact for many, it's become a beloved holiday tradition they look forward to – a time of profound meaning and generosity.

We've come a long way since our very first Christmas program in 1968 when we raised \$475. Together, we've overcome tough economic times, making sure that residents in need are supported. But this year is like no other. The needs are so much greater.

**Our goal this year is to raise \$125,000** — important funds that will make a big difference for hundreds of local children, youth, individuals and families, by giving them a little bit of Christmas magic under the tree and a whole lot of hope for a better 2021. Please give what you can. Thank you!

On behalf of all those we serve, I wish you a very Merry Christmas,

Susanna Newton  
Executive Director  
Society of Organized Services



To find out how you can support our [Caring for Community at Christmas](#) this year with a cash or toy donation, [click here](#).