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# Insider

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**HERO**  
GIVES GIFTS



# Amazing gifts

BY STACIE CHARBONNEAU HESS

**There's a hero in our midst here on the South Coast. His name is Jim Stevens, but if you happen to run into him, you might never know he is a hero.**

**P**hysically, he is unassuming – balding hair, and comfortably dressed the day we visit: in loafers, a violet button-down and a sweater vest. He could be anybody's cheerful grandfather.

Just below the service, however, when you speak to Jim, you notice a quality that is hard to name. Some may say charming, some persuasive, some single-minded. He is certainly all of these things.

What you notice, however, is a quiet yet profound power when he speaks. He makes you want to listen. You know what he is saying is important. And when you look around at the interior of Gifts to Give, you know that something rather magical is going on.

The Gifts to Give Philanthropy Factory, as it is formally known, relocated a little over a year ago from the South End of New Bedford to Titleist Drive in Acushnet – increasing its size and scope. I am here to introduce my students at Northeast Maritime Institute in Fairhaven of potential community service opportunities. "We just finished unpacking," admits Jim, as my students and I stare in wonder at the size of the project.

## Gifts growing

Inside, there are thousands and thousands of books stacked on shelves. Dozens of adults with disabilities are coloring and packaging and taping and sorting and answering phones.

There are heaps of toys and games lining the colorful walls – and as this is my first visit to their new facility, I am impressed by the sheer size and space – increased capacity is certainly a factor in this move.

Then, of course, there are the clothes: neatly folded in some instances, bursting from large rolling bins, sorted, labeled, stacked upon shelves. These clothes will find their way to children all over the South Coast through social service agencies such as Child and Family Services or the Family Resource Center who place "orders" for low-income families in their care and pick them up when the orders are filled. The orders, when complete, have been handled lovingly by at least a dozen volunteers, among them children.

Children ages three and up clean toys, sort clothes to be sure they are free from tears and stains, fold and stack them, and fill orders. Gifts to Give's mission is also to promote early

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literacy; each child's completed "gift" comes with a selection of carefully selected books and a backpack to put them in.

Years ago, the idea for Gifts to Give stemmed from Jim's reflection on what the legacy of his generation might be. "When I was a student," Jim muses, "We went to the moon. Seriously. We actually put two guys in a tube and shot them into outer space. I ask children today what's amazing in their lives, and they can't tell me."

He sought to fill this void by creating a place where children can learn to serve, to instill the idea and action of philanthropy at a young age, so it becomes a habitual practice. The idea for a hands-on facility was born of connecting people of Jim's generations – Boomers with time, energy and resources – to children in need today.



"In the cold light of day," Jim continues, "I look at children now in America and there are two kinds of children: children that are privileged and children living in poverty... and they have something in common – they are clueless, they are truly clueless. The privileged children are clueless about how lucky they are, and the children living in poverty are clueless about the choices they have. So for me to affect a change, I wanted to develop a model for thousands and thousands of kids from both sides of the track, to share a common goal. I wanted to teach a new kind of civic engagement or philanthropy. I like to call it Tangible Philanthropy."

### Tangible philanthropy

To fulfill this vision, Gifts to Give fulfills orders for 150 social service agencies, processing thousands of pounds of recycled items to get them into the hands of children and families who need them. This is accomplished, perhaps astoundingly, with child and adult volunteers and an entirely unpaid staff. Although Gifts to Give pays expenses to maintain and improve their building, staff costs are zero.

The business model of Tangible Philanthropy has thrived as Gifts to Give has touched nearly every school-aged child on the South Coast – some as volunteers, others as recipients of recycled goods.

In "Project Cinderella," high school juniors and seniors can shop for prom dresses and fancy shoes. Adult volunteers serve as mentors for middle school girls in New Bedford

**With thousands of volunteers preparing gifts for children living in poverty, chances are you have been touched in some way by Gifts to Give.**

in the "Sorority" mentoring project. Hundreds of low-income children build gingerbread houses and receive free books during the holiday season. Gifts to Give is an operation of heroic proportions.

What is also heroic and inspiring about Gifts to Give is that the organization has thrived with no public funding whatsoever. The whole project is green, from repurpos-

ing items to installing LED lighting in the new facility. Green does not mean free, however. Ideally, Jim would like to see the organization becomes self-sustaining in the coming years.

To this end, the idea for a Thrift Store was born. Since Gifts to Give gives away only children's clothing, staff decided to put high-quality donated adult items to good use.

From 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday, Gifts to Give offers for purchase high-quality, new and gently used items starting at just one dollar. Prices are standard for most items: \$1 T-shirts, \$2 Pants and Skirts, \$3 Blouses and Sweaters, and \$4 jeans. Suits, purses, home goods, and name-brand or new items are individually marked.

When shoppers go to the Thrift Store at Gifts to Give, they are financially impacting the organization, buffeting the orga-



nization against setbacks and helping it become self-sustaining – Jim Stevens's goal.

With thousands of volunteers preparing gifts for children living in poverty, chances are you have been touched in some way by Gifts to Give.

Please visit their website, [www.GiftsToGive.org](http://www.GiftsToGive.org), or better yet, take a tour of the facility to learn more! Volunteering is easy, with drop-in hours and a manager on-site during working hours.

Visit Gifts to Give on Titleist Drive in Acushnet to drop off clothes or small household items (the rule is small enough that an eight year old could carry it.) You can volunteer alone, with a group, or with the children in your life.

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