

Film pro adds glitter to 'store'

Volunteer knows how to 'kick up' light

BY SAM COOPER, THE PROVINCE NOVEMBER 30, 2009 7:10 AM



Volunteer Marta McLaughlin arranges decorations in the window of the Burnaby Christmas Bureau.

Photograph by: Jon Murray, The Province

Call it Extreme Makeover: Santa's Toy Store.

The Burnaby Christmas Bureau has landed a new volunteer with the skill and creativity to spruce up a rather dingy vacant space in the Brentwood Town Centre, so that needy parents will have a similar "shopping experience" to the other retail spaces in the mall.

Marta McLaughlin, a prop-and-set expert with a local film studio, was faced with "no budget" but had enough materials saved from movies to divide the space into an attractive registration area, an eye-drawing Christmas window display, a "toy store" with age-appropriate shelves, and the warehouse-like toy storage space in the back.

Parents and children don't see the back room, as McLaughlin has blocked it off with two silver "space blankets" and a festive curtain.

"We have to preserve some of the magic for the clients," she said. And the entrance to the "toy store" is decorated with attractive holiday touches.

"I had this red paper from a Christmas movie we finished," she said. "I thought, this has a little bit of shine -- it's gonna kick up some light." McLaughlin said her filming schedule has slowed down, allowing her to volunteer during the holidays.

"It makes me feel good to come in and help," she said.

When The Province visited the bureau, about 4,000 toys were being carted in from the Lower Mainland Christmas Bureau.

Claudine Souza, community relations manager for the Burnaby bureau, said client demand is up 22 per cent from Christmas 2008.

"I'm always so impressed with the donors," Souza said. "I'm grateful for everything, but we don't know with the economic crisis how many families we will be able to serve." In 2008, the bureau distributed a total of 4,400 food vouchers, worth \$30 each. This year, the vouchers will be reduced to \$25, as the bureau tries to spread resources to meet increased client totals.

Pam Bloom manages the bureau's toy distribution and tries to make sure every parent gets what they want, even when supplies get thin.

A five-year-veteran, Bloom remembered one especially touching scene from 2008. A mother was searching for a specific racetrack set for her seven-year-old boy and couldn't find anything comparable on the shelves.

"She said, 'He'll be so disappointed,'" Bloom recalled. "I went in the back room and found one set with some big loops, and brought it out. She burst into tears and said, 'This is the exact one he wanted.' She went out of here just bawling." - Last year, Province readers raised \$335,000 for the Empty Stocking Fund, now in its 91st year. The money is given to 27 community groups.

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