



Charitable groups feel economic pinch

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With a Christmas carol playing on a cornet in the background, Kristine Gianna said economic concerns have driven her to scale back her spending, clip coupons and search for bargains.

She still managed to drop \$1 into the Salvation Army kettle at Jersey Shore Premium Outlets in Tinton Falls on Friday.

"A dollar here, 25 cents there. I'd rather give it to them than waste it on fast food," Gianna said.

The Shore's charitable organizations, ubiquitous during the holiday season, can only hope Gianna's attitude isn't unique. They are facing an uphill climb to generate enough donations - money, food, clothing or toys - to satisfy the heavy demand.

Some say it will be tough to reach their goals. Others seem to be getting by. But they all say they are victims of an economy that has soured. Corporations fighting to stay in business are proving less generous, and consumers battered by the plummeting stock market, falling home prices and job cuts are holding on tighter to their wallets.

"I don't think anybody in the charitable sector has been through a giving season with more question marks than this," said Eileen Heisman, president and chief executive officer of the National Philanthropic Trust, a charitable advocacy group in Jenkintown, Pa.

Not that there's a lack of opportunity to donate. At Freehold Raceway Mall, no fewer than 17 stores have programs to raise money for charities, ranging from Monmouth Cares to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. The U.S. Marine Corps' Toys for Tots program established drop-off sites at local malls. The Salvation Army's bell-ringing kettle workers have spread out region wide.

Some of the organizations said they have had trouble collecting as many items as they need. The Salvation Army of Ocean County has a toy drive in which needy families next week are scheduled to receive toys to take home.

The problem: The Salvation Army needs toys for about 800 children. But it is on pace to come up about 350 toys short, said Capt. Lorie Travaglino, administrator of the Salvation Army in Ocean County.

"Those toys have come in pretty scarily slower than in years past," Travaglino said.

The impact can be severe. Maj. Bill Furman of the Salvation Army in Asbury Park played "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" on his cornet, calling attention to the Salvation Army kettle at the Jersey Shore Premium Outlets.

The holiday cheer then faded as Furman assessed what is shaping up as one of the toughest seasons for charitable giving in memory.

"No one likes to say 'no' when people don't have food or assistance on their utility bills," Furman said.

Heisman at the National Philanthropic Trust said the economic conditions this December are among the worst she can remember in her 25-year career. Major stock indexes have fallen about 40 percent in the past year. Homeowners have seen thousands of dollars of their equity evaporate. The jobless rate is climbing fast.

It makes for a rare worker whose nerves aren't rattled, she said.

"I don't think people are feeling less generous," Heisman said. "I think they're just feeling nervous."

That hasn't escaped the attention of nonprofit workers. Chick Chechele, chairman of the Toys for Tots Marine Corps League Detachment 796, was pleasantly surprised his group is matching last year's levels.

"It's a great thing for people to give because many people are out of work and unemployment is up," he explained, while loading donated toys into large bags to add with 125 toys donated by the Women's Club of Brick. "Some people cut back, and some still feel a lot for children. To see a kid suffer because they can't get a toy is really bad."

In Manchester, Kevin Burger, founder of the Kevin's Kids Christmas Drive, said there is a historic high of 380 children needing gifts due to hard times.

With about 80 more Manchester children needing gifts compared with last year, he wondered if the gifts collected and the nearly \$40,000 the group has raised will be enough to complete the wish lists, which include bicycles and winter coats.

"The response from the community has been overwhelming. As scary as the numbers are with the kids, the outpouring from the community is the highest ever," said Burger, a director of student and administrative services for the Manchester school district.

"People just give because they know it's the right thing to do," he said. "Even as bad as the times are, people are still willing to give. (A donation) may look like a small contribution, but every little bit adds up."

Shore area shoppers seem to be keeping that in mind. Kim Ruvolo, 38, of the Bayville section of Berkeley, took a break from shopping at the Ocean County Mall Friday to study the gift tags on the Salvation Army Christmas tree, finally selecting one for a boy.

"Christmas is all about children, and I hate to see a child not get a present," said Ruvolo, who said she tries to donate every year. "I wish I could do more."