

SKYLINE

Do-gooder collecting toys for Christmas

Heart of the 'hood

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FELICIA DECHTER



Debra Kohnke

There's a sadness heard in Debra Kohnke's voice as she talks about her childhood, and the upcoming holiday season.

"Christmas was always rough for me, I get depressed," said Kohnke, a Lake View resident who spent her life growing up in numerous foster homes and orphanages. "It can be very rough. As much as it is for the happy people, it can be just as devastating for the other people. It's a double-edged sword."

"It's a sad time," added Kohnke, "so it's kind of hard. But you do what you have to do."

Twenty-two years ago, to help ease her holiday blues, Kohnke started collecting toys at Christmas. That way, kids like she once was — without family and love — would never be without a toy. That past gesture meant the world to her, and now that Kohnke is an adult, she's on a mission every holiday season to supply kids with toys.

"That's the way I celebrate my Christmas," said Kohnke, the second oldest of 15 kids. "It made me feel a little better."

She recalled how she felt, when as a child one year at Christmas the local firemen threw a party for the kids at her orphanage and gave them all gifts.

“I always remembered that,” said Kohnke, who’s “almost 60,” and works in the hospitality industry. “Maybe if one kid I bought a present for remembered, that’d be nice. Many kids never experience that joy, or know what that feels like.”

Kohnke is collecting new, unwrapped gifts, but no toy guns and nothing needing batteries. Art and musical stuff would be appreciated, and she’s big on books. And for the third year straight, Dr. Brooke Jackson, whose office is at 111 N. Wabash Ave., is lending a hand. The toys are donated to day care centers, pre- and elementary schools, shelters, letters to Santa programs and churches.

Last Christmas 440 toys were collected.

“We had a lot last year,” said Kohnke, who is still seeking a partnership toy-distributing ride. “I was really surprised, especially with the economy.”

Anyone wishing to donate should call Kohnke, (773) 558-0792 or drop a toy off at Dr. Jackson’s office.

“Everybody should have a good holiday,” she said. “Lots of peace.”

I second that — a safe, peaceful, and Happy Thanksgiving to all.