



Meet some of the people the Caring and Sharing Exchange has helped in the past during the holidays.

We thank them for sharing their stories.

Marie

Up until a couple of years ago Marie, her husband and two sons lived a comfortable enough life, and helped those less fortunate when they could. After her husband had heart bypass surgery, he was unable to return to work as a driver. In order to keep up with the bills the family was forced to sell their home and move into rental housing.

During this period, Marie, who will be celebrating her 40th wedding anniversary this year, had to sell her diamond ring to pay bills and buy food. Last year things got worse when her rent increased, leaving her with very little funds to buy food for Christmas, or a gift for her granddaughter. Not knowing where to turn, Marie contacted the Christmas Exchange.

A food hamper was sent to help Marie and her family to celebrate the holidays during this difficult time in their lives.

Lisa

Lisa has over 20 years work experience, 16 on contract with the federal government. A single mother of one girl and two boys; one with Autism and the other with ADHD, Lisa having been raised on a farm is use to hard work. She raised her children with a strong work ethic and taught them the importance of giving back to society by volunteering. In fact she was the one in her office that organized the Christmas hampers for families in need, a task she says “brought me unbelievable heart warming satisfaction.”

In 2000 Lisa took ill and could no longer work. With three children in her care, and no benefit package at work, she was forced to apply to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), even though by doing so she had to give up any retirement savings she managed to scrape together over 20 years of working. As an ODSP recipient she is not allowed to receive any child support payments from her ex-husband, although he is obligated to make them. Her monthly income is now \$1,636 and her rent is \$1,025. Add in utilities and there is not much left with which to buy food. There are weeks where she can't afford milk, bread or snacks for her children to take to school. The lack of good nutritious food has affected the health of her daughter who now suffers from liver problems.

Her two bedroom apartment is nothing fancy. Her daughter has the smallest bedroom, and the two boys share the larger bedroom, with Lisa sleeping on a mattress in the closet of her sons' room. No window, little room to move, and no privacy for herself or her boys.

In her thank you note for the Christmas hamper she received from the Christmas Exchange program, Lisa says “We appreciate the fact that we will have a better and happy holiday because great people such as you have made it possible. Thank you so much.”

Lorna

Lorna as a single mom of three, was always a go-getter. In the early 1970s, she graduated from university in order to be able to give her three young children a better life. When her children were old enough to move out on their own, Lorna met someone she thought was a wonderful man. Together she and her new love moved to a small town in southwestern Ontario and started a business. In addition to running the business, Lorna became

very active in her community with the local BIA (Business Improvement Association) and the annual Winter Festival. Everything was going well and Lorna had every reason to believe that when the time came she and her partner would have a good retirement.

Sadly and without Lorna's knowledge, her partner became involved in some unsavory activities. When she was out of town visiting her daughter to celebrate her grandchildren's birthdays, Lorna contacted the police to say that she feared for her safety if she was to return to her partner. Knowing that her partner owned a hand-gun, the police advised Lorna not return home. So at the age of 64, after a 25 year relationship, Lorna found herself fleeing her home and everything she had worked so hard to build. Although she had no family and no job in Ottawa, she knew that her partner would not look for her here.

Lorna arrived in Ottawa mid-December with limited possessions and had a difficult time making ends meet. That first year Lorna received help from the Christmas Exchange program in the form of a grocery voucher. "The assistance I received helped to restore my faith in people", Lorna said. "To know that there are people out there that care is beyond words". Since Lorna is diabetic the grocery voucher allowed her to buy the fresh fruits and vegetables so important in a diabetic diet.

After everything she has been through Lorna sees herself as a survivor not a victim, and is grateful and happy for everything she has. Now officially a senior over 65 years of age, Lorna is active in her Ottawa community, and volunteers at her local food cupboard. She has found a safe home.

George

George did everything right. He went to University and has two degrees. He got a job; got married and had two children.

After working for over 35 years both in Canada and abroad, George became ill and had to be hospitalized. His illness landed him in the hospital for a period of time and he ended up no longer able to work. He now lives on a disability pension having depleted his life savings and RRSP's to pay the bills.

In his letter of thanks, George says, "When you're on a small disability pension, like me, the nature of the gifts you can give your children and the nature of the food you can celebrate the season with is restricted. The Christmas Exchange program's certificate that I received helped me to enjoy some festive meals while still being able to provide some nice presents — easing the financial stress of the holidays. Many thanks to those involved."

Sharon

In 1991 Sharon's life was good. She had two healthy children and both her and her husband had secure jobs working for Sharon's parent's courier company, located in the basement of her parent's home. Their future looked secure with Sharon's parents intending to retire in a few years and wanting Sharon and her husband to take over their business.

One night, all of their hopes went up in flames when a fire at her parent's home destroyed both the home and the business. Although they tried to salvage what they could of the business, within a year her parents were forced to sell and all employees, including Sharon and her husband were laid off. They were jobless with two young children and Christmas just around the corner. Without a steady income it was hard to afford the everyday necessities let alone a Christmas dinner and presents.

Sharon will always remember the overwhelming gratitude she felt when the Christmas Exchange food hamper arrived. She still gets choked up thinking about it.

Réjean

Réjean was about five years old when his family first received a basket of food, with a turkey and small gifts for all eight kids. He remembers thinking how nice the people were to give them these things. Although his father worked up to 16 hours a day as a trucker in the late 1950s and early 60s he made meager non-unionized wages. His low income made it difficult for him to provide more than the daily necessities leaving very little for special occasions.

At home with eight kids his mother worked just as hard, cutting down and remaking old shirts for the boys when their father had frayed the collars and cuffs beyond repair. Réjean remembers how happy it made his mother to be able to make a special dinner for her family at Christmas when the basket of food was received.

Because of his experiences growing up, Réjean gives back to the community by volunteering on several non-profit boards.

Colleen

Colleen led a comfortable middle class life growing up, attended university and became a financial analyst. Her middle class status continued after she married and became a stay at home mom of three small children ages 2, 4 and 5, and ran a small home-based business with her husband. Colleen's life was turned upside down overnight when her husband of several years emptied out all their bank accounts, including the one for their joint business, and disappeared with the family car.

With no job Colleen could not make the mortgage payments, car payments or cover the unpaid bills. She had no choice but to pack up what few belongings would fit into a couple of garbage bags and leave the family home with her three children. The unimaginable had happened and Colleen had to apply for social assistance. Putting food on the table turned into a daily struggle. It all happened a decade ago, but Colleen has never forgotten the surge of hope she felt getting a grocery voucher from the Christmas Exchange program that first Christmas on her own. Within six months Colleen had found a job and taken the necessary steps to get her family's lives back on track.

Today, Colleen is happily remarried and her main concern now is to help others who have fallen on hard times through no fault of their own.

Geri

In the 1960s, Geri was a young, single mother with four children. Her eldest child was diabetic, her second child had asthma, and her third was epileptic. Geri had no choice but to work from her home in order to care for her children because daycare was rare and expensive. The added cost of medication and insulin needles led to a higher cost of living.

Every year, Geri's children would give her their Christmas Wish List and every year she would be unable to afford even the smallest item on their list. The food voucher she received from the Christmas Exchange program each December helped to stretch her budget so that she was able to get a small present for her children. Geri's children are now parents and are supporting families of their own. She is thankful every year for the help she received and gives back to the community by volunteering regularly.

Maxine

Unexpectedly in the 1970s, Maxine became a single working mother. She had two very young boys to care for and no family in the area to give her support. Rent was cheaper outside of town, but that forced her to hitchhike weekly into Ottawa for groceries. These struggles left her with no time or money to think about Christmas for her sons.

When Maxine received help from the Caring and Sharing Exchange's Christmas program, she no longer felt like she was alone. "I was so moved I wept through the night— but they were tears of joy, knowing that someone ... recognized me as a worthwhile person and no longer a stranger." Maxine has since made it her life's work to improve the lot of the homeless and hungry and has received two awards for outstanding service to the community.

Lucette

Lucette was retraining for a new career in high-tech and was only two weeks away from graduating from her computer programming course. On the eve of the job interview she had been looking forward to, she was sitting in the front passenger seat of a friend's car when they were hit broadside by another vehicle. Although the air bag released, the force of the impact severely injured her from the neck to her hand. She was still recovering 8 months later.

Lucette's life changed in an instant. Because she had not yet started work, she did not qualify for insurance money. This was why the food voucher meant a lot to Lucette. Wanting to make the best of a situation, Lucette learned more about the Caring and Sharing Exchange, still called the Christmas Exchange then, and volunteered at an event. "I know from many years of volunteering that one of the best ways to feel better during life's difficult times is to do something to help others." Lucette continues to make the best of her situation, volunteering and working when she is able to, between corrective surgeries and periods of rehabilitation, and looks forward to the day when she might be free of pain.

Judy

Judy's mother had seven children and worked very hard to support her large family in the 1960s. Her stepfather tried his best too — when he was sober. There was not always enough for the basic necessities. At times, there wasn't even enough food for lunches. Judy sometimes pretended to forget to bring her lunch to school so her younger siblings had some food.

It was difficult enough during the year but Christmas was especially hard for her family. When Judy was about ten, her family received help from the Christmas program of the Caring and Sharing Exchange. This excited the whole family, making her mother cry with joy.

Remembering the difference it made in her life, Judy is now a dedicated supporter of the Christmas Exchange program.

Diane

Diane had made a good career as a hairdresser — until she was afflicted with arthritis so severe she was forced into a wheelchair. Hairdressing was no longer an option. That same year the voucher from the Christmas Exchange program helped Diane to prepare a holiday meal for her recently widowed mother, her son, who had recently lost his job, and an elderly neighbour whose apartment had recently been destroyed by fire.

Diane got great comfort from the thought that complete strangers were willing to help her through the Caring and Sharing Exchange and its Christmas program. Just knowing people cared gave her so much hope. Since she could no longer make a living as a hairdresser, Diane studied at Algonquin College to become a biomedical technician assistant. She also volunteered at the Caring and Sharing Exchange to give back to a community that in her words helped to encourage people like her.