

SUBURBAN LIFE

C

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1993



LORETTA ZAHN

The kindness of strangers is ample here

It is said that charity begins at home, but that depends on just how you measure your home territory. Do you measure "home" by the perimeters of your own lot line or does it include your community? It is Farmington Neighborhood House's hope that the latter is true.

For many years Farmington Neighborhood House has worked to connect disadvantaged Farmington citizens with available resources in the area. With today's soft economy that goal has been increasingly difficult to achieve. Unfortunately, this same economy has created many more families in dire financial straits.

How do you tell a small child who watches the same commercials that bombard his more affluent peers, that Santa just might not be able to visit him this year?

You don't tell him, you just pray that somehow, some way, magic happens and that beautifully wrapped packages appear under the tree and delicious smelling food is miraculously cooking in the kitchen.

These prayers are answered by various churches, civic organizations and generous private citizens in our area. These real life Santa's helpers call Neighborhood House with the offer to "adopt" one or more families for the holidays.

The Neighborhood House volunteers then search the files to find the right family for the donor. The family is called on the phone or, if necessary, a home visit is made to find out the children's names, ages, clothing sizes as well as their wish list. The information is then sent to the donor using first names only as well as a control number to ensure that the right packages get to the right families.

The donors deliver their Christmas packages to a central warehouse after which a phone call is made to the appropriate family, and they can come to pick up their holiday goodies. This is all accomplished while ensuring total anonymity for both donor and recipient.

There are as many different reasons as to why people find themselves in need as there are needy families.

Last year one young mother had made the courageous decision to leave her physically abusive alcohol-addicted husband. She had obtained a restraining order so the man could no longer intimidate her or her three small children. She was barely able to make ends meet and Christmas was more than out of the question.

A local group "adopted" the family and she was called to come to pick up her food and gifts. After we filled the trunk of her car as well as the back seat, we wished her Merry Christmas and thought she was on her way. Ten minutes later the door to the warehouse opened and there she stood, crying. "I thought I was coming to pick up a couple of things for the kids," she said. "I never believed it would be all of this! Who do I thank? Who would do all of this for a stranger?"

Another family consisted of a couple and their two children, ages 4 years and 18 months. Dad had a job but one weekend, attempting to do some home repair work on his roof, he slipped and broke his back. Medical bills came before holiday buying and once again, a Farmington family made sure that Santa didn't forget these little ones.

One of our donors from a local computer company always includes in his Christmas packages gifts to open on Christmas Eve. In those packages are new pajamas, nightgowns, slippers and robes so when Christmas dawns, the children are "new" from the skin out.

Each year there are stories and families to bring a smile to your face or a tear to your eye. It is sad, however, that frequently no one wants to "adopt" families with teenagers. You can't buy teens cute little baby dolls or nifty fire trucks. Often, though, these teens have jobs and are contributing to the family income to ensure that the rent is paid and the heat stays on. It's a bit difficult for these teens to keep a stiff upper lip when there aren't any gifts for them under the tree.

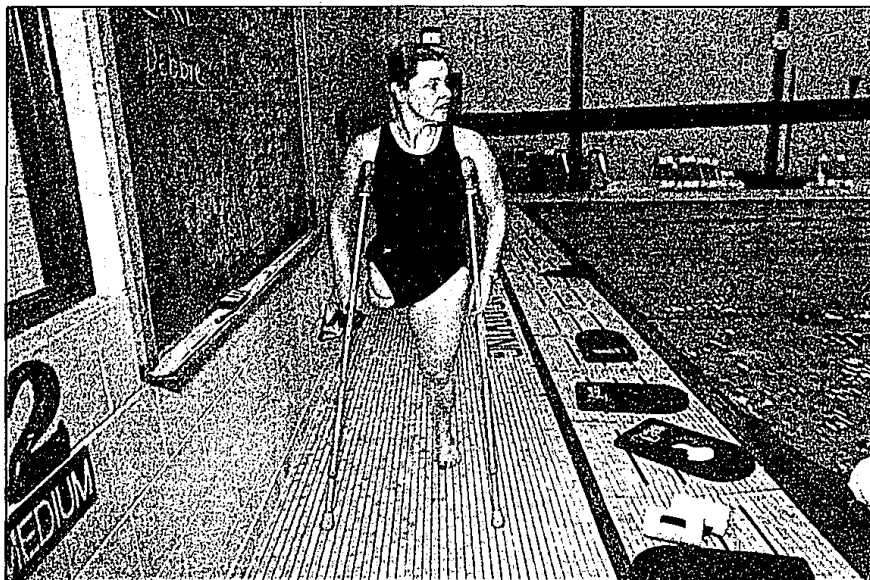
At this time of year being a Neighborhood House volunteer means long hours making phone calls and addressing envelopes, but it is truly a labor of love. When the last packages are picked up or delivered and we go home that night — sleep is very sweet.

If you know of a family in the Farmington area in need, if you would like to "adopt" one of our families or if you wish to volunteer some of your time, call us at 474-7880.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus and he's alive and well and living in the Farmington area.

Loretta Zahn coordinates the Neighborhood House Adopt a Family program.

"The amputation has made me so much stronger mentally. I've had to learn to stand up for myself." Beverly Cornell



SHARON LEMIREUX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Workout: Beverly Cornell finishes a vigorous swim at the Farmington Area YMCA.

Since the amputation of her right leg, Beverly Cornell has overcome physical and emotional pain. She channels her strength to achieve countless conquests.

by DIANE GALE, STAFF WRITER

The challenge of a lifetime

When Beverly Cornell was seven years old she was given the devastating news that she had a rare and debilitating bone disease.

Four decades later she's showing the world that having her right leg amputated has been the catalyst for tremendous physical strength and emotional fortitude.

The Farmington Hills woman has the medals to prove her physical strength. Her emotional pluck is just as obvious.

Most recently she won first place in five categories during a recent Masters Swim Meet in Harbor Springs, Mich. Cornell doesn't compete with disabled swimmers.

"I used to compete in the wheelchair games, but it's just not challenging enough," she said. "This forces me to continue training, and it forces me to get stronger."

Building strength

Cornell has built her upper body strength so much that it compensates for the loss of her leg. Her doctors tell her that rigorous training has helped her fight the bone disease, polyostotic fibrous dysplasia. "This one woman said once: 'You beat me with only one flipper, meaning one leg,'" Cornell, 47, said adding that she thought the comment was endearing.

When she first started competing in masters swimming, Cornell was worried that other swimmers would think she expected special treat-

ment. "I emphasized that I wanted to be treated exactly the same," she said.

Once at a masters swimming meet a woman approached Cornell and said that at first she didn't believe Cornell belonged with able-bodied swimmers, but watching her swim dispelled those thoughts.

New reactions

Using crutches since she was a young girl and undergoing 29 operations, including two hip replacements, before her leg was amputated 10 years ago, Cornell said, she's taken the pain — both physical and mental — and used it to her benefit.

And now that her disability is obvious, Cornell said, she has noticed a stark difference from the reactions she received when she was on crutches.

"When people saw me on crutches they thought, 'Oh she must have had a skiing accident and that was OK,'" she said. "Now I'm treated like a disabled person and it's real different."

Cornell added, however, that she's a lot better off since the amputation, because her leg had often been a hindrance. It was fragile, often broken and when she swam it would slam against the pool back boards.

"I'm so much healthier, happier and stronger," she said. "I'm so much stronger emotionally, too, because I had to overcome being an amputee."

See SWIMMER, 2C

Woman finds fancy flair, fun in fashion

By DIANE GALE
STAFF WRITER

The next time you can't decide what to wear, think about Betty Jo Hammer and her 250 pairs of shoes and boots.

Surprisingly, Hammer said, it's not too hard to choose an outfit. In the morning, she feels like wearing a certain color and since her closets are color-coordinated, the outfits are already matched. "Everything has to match," Hammer insisted.

She has belts, trays and trays of jewelry, purses, 50 watches and more than 100 hats.

Gold dominates

During the holidays, the Farmington Hills woman has 25 pairs of holiday shoes from which to choose. Sequins and the color gold dominate her varied outfits.

OFF THE CUFF

"I love color," she said. "I think that's important in dressing."

"I'm known as the hat lady in the real estate industry," said Hammer, a real estate agent for 25 years. She works with Ralph Manuel, Farmington Hills West.

"When I buy an outfit, I get a purse and a pair of shoes," she said. "That way when I go out I'm ready — ready to go to anything."

Hammer's favorite store for clothes had been Libeth's Shoppe in Birmingham until they closed earlier this year. In the past 10 years, Hammer modeled for the shop. Having been a dancer, including a stint with the USO, Hammer

loved the runway.

"When I model, I dance when I come up," she said, adding that she was given a flapper outfit and bon at Libeth's and her routine would serve as the grand finale of fashion shows.

Family first

Hammer, 69, and her husband, Jack, have four children — Nancy Boyer, Tim and Jamie who live in Hawaii, and Mary Jo Halleck of Farmington Hills.

Hammer's daughters get first dibs when she dictates an outfit.

"But because I mix and match a lot, I'm not quick to give things away," she said. "I really wear my clothes."

See FASHION, 3C