

That's A Wrap

By Katy Hopkins

Section: B

Page: B1

Intelligencer Journal-Lancaster New Era (PA)

Published: December 21, 2009

LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Correspondent Over the past 40 years, Pat Hartzell has spent countless days at Park City Center during the holiday season.

But she isn't part of the frantic herd of shoppers.

Instead, she has helped calm holiday anxieties and spread cheer at the United Disabilities Services Gift Wrap booth, long a staple in the Sears mall.

She has seen it all, from wrapping a canoe to hiding engagement rings and car keys.

One change this year, though, came when a record-breaking number of volunteers - close to 350 - met with a disappointing slump in customers.

After an unusually slow early December, business has been picking up, volunteer coordinator Jane Hartin said, though she doubts if the group will raise the \$30,000 to \$40,000 the booth usually generates for social programs at UDS.

The money covers services that aren't funded by state and federal sources, said Ellie LaCasse, a booth volunteer whose 37-year-old son, Ben, takes advantage of UDS day programs, goal-setting classes, trips and dances with his peers.

"This is a place that they go that they have activities and friends and outings, when otherwise they might just be at home with their parents," LaCasse said. "These kind of socialization activities are not things that any grant program is going to take care of."

Instead, the money is raised at the booth, where packages are wrapped for \$2 to about \$15, depending on the size of a gift. Purchases can be wrapped as-is or in pre-measured boxes, in one of 17 different papers and with an even larger selection of bows.

Customers can cater the wrapping to their preferences or leave the decorating up to the creative discretion of volunteers.

Hartzell said business has been brisk on her Thursday evening shifts, but she's gearing up for the Christmas Eve rush of perennial last-minute shoppers - "teens, college kids and men," she said.

"They've only just discovered it's Christmas."

Hartzell said she's seen customers of all shapes and sizes, from young children counting out pennies as payment to harried boyfriends and husbands anxiously glancing over their shoulders for the significant other they're shopping for.

One such customer was Raymond Hohl, who stole away with his 2-year-old son, Zachary, for a few precious moments amid the mall chaos on a recent evening.

"My wife is in the mall, and I can't carry unwrapped presents to the car," he said.

Hohl, a self-proclaimed "outstanding wrapper," said he was "thoroughly impressed" by the speed and style of the booth's wrappers.

Women frequent the booth about as much as men, Hartzell said. They often comment on the wrapping expertise of her husband, Gene.

"Women will always say to him, 'My husband could never do that,'" Hartzell said.

But Gene, a wrapper with 25 years of experience, remains modest when faced with awe and praise.

"It's a level of expectation," he said as he meticulously smoothed paper around the corners of Tammy and Kayla Hulyo's square package.

The booth is open during regular mall hours, and volunteers will cheerfully be wrapping gifts until 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve, so there are still ample opportunities for relief from holiday stress, LaCasse said.

"So many people are just so thankful to have it done for them," she said, laughing. "A man today said, 'You've just saved me about 20 hours of screaming.'"

To order a reprint of this document go to lancasteronline.com/reprint