

SPOTLIGHT

## Community seniors give back to local homeless through gift wrapping

By HEATHER GORDON Correspondent  
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Heritage Meadows seniors in St. Peter gave back to the community, wrapping gifts for families at Union Street Place. (Heather Gordon/St. Peter Herald)

**W**ith the holiday spirit of giving upon us this time of year, St. Peter Heritage Meadow residents joined forces with Partners For Affordable Housing (PAH), and Freedom Home Care, to bring cheer and perhaps a little less stress to the families at Union Street Shelter this year.

Residents of the Heritage Meadows Assisted Living facility graciously volunteered their time to wrap personalized gifts and household items donated to PAH by area businesses, individuals, and churches for the cause. According to PAH Communications Manager Kirsten Becker, the holiday season can be a very stressful time for homeless families living at the shelter. When these families are trying to get on their feet and secure sustainable housing, saving money is their main focus, and having the added stress of holiday gift giving is a burden that shelter residents do not need.

"We have been doing the gift giving project for six years now (at our Mankato shelters) and having the residents of Heritage Meadows (in St. Peter) volunteer their time to help with this project is very generous of them. We really appreciate the community involvement and their support of our mission at PAH — providing safe and stable housing to our clients," said Becker.

Six years ago, while donating gifts to PAH for the holidays, Christine Nessler, co-owner and community outreach for Freedom Home Care, learned that PAH was in need of volunteers to wrap gifts for area shelters. Through her connections with local senior living communities, Nessler reached out to each facility for volunteers for such a project, and the gift wrapping project was born.

"We know just how important PAH is to our community, and the senior living communities have people willing to help. This is a fun way to be festive and give back in a meaningful way, from area residents who may have been very active in the community in the past," Nessler said.

Nessler's organization coordinates with each area senior living facility for volunteers each year and provides treats, holiday music, and gift wrapping supplies for the event.

This year, with Union Street Place shelter celebrating its first Christmas with St. Peter residents, case managers Kelsey Johnson-Rode and Holland Peterson have tried to make this holiday season a lot warmer and a little cozier for the five families currently being housed over the holidays.

"(We) asked each families' parent(s) what their children liked and were interested in, so that we could match each person with a gift they may find extra special," Johnson-Rode said.

The two local case managers got to act as 'elves' for the day and pick out the gifts from donated items,

(Heather Gordon/St. Peter Herald)

accommodating each family as much as they could. Each family received a gift bundle with household items, such as laundry and kitchen necessities, some type of family entertainment, a gift card for gas or groceries, and an age appropriate gift for each family member.

"We tried to accommodate each family as much as we could, as per their requests for items in need," said Johnson-Rode. "While each family received household necessities and some food items, each gift bundle also contained something special, such as treats and even items like a heating pad or something to pamper the moms."

With the recent move to their main office, Union Street Place shelter now has a community area and full kitchen facilities for the residents to utilize. Residents can also enjoy the main space over the holidays, which includes a Christmas tree, where families can gather to open gifts, if they choose.

Approximately 60 gift bundles were wrapped for area shelters by senior living facilities, with one third of those bundles being prepared and assembled by the Heritage Meadow residents.

Benedictine Living Community Administrator/CEO Teresa Hildebrandt explained that the gift wrapping event is an opportunity for all ability levels of residents to take part in and give back to the rest of the community in a meaningful way.

"Every year, this event is a nice outreach for the (Benedictine) community to do something within their realm and have fun doing it," said Hildebrandt. (Heather Gordon/St. Peter Herald)

One resident volunteer, Bonnie Aebly, volunteered to wrap gifts after only having moved to the area a few days prior to the event.

"I did this because it is Christmas and what better way to spread holiday cheer to others," Aebly said. "Not only was this a way to help others feel festive, but it was also a way for me to make new friends, as well."

Gift bundles were delivered to each family prior to the holidays, so parents could decide when to give the gifts to their families. Families also utilized the Sharing Tree services for gifts for the holidays, a non-profit seasonal gift giving project, providing gifts for families in need within Nicollet and Blue Earth counties.

According to Heather Deshayes, Campus Sales Coordinator for the Benedictine Living Community, taking care of the community is not only a part of the mission at Benedictine Senior Living Community of St. Peter, but also the heart of who they are.

"Knowing these gifts (we) are wrapping are going to St. Peter families this holiday season is such a personal and wonderful way to fill someone's heart with the joy of the Christmas season," said Deshayes.

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