



## SECRET SANTA AND THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

So for me, Christmas is about celebrating family and giving them something to look forward to each winter. It's about creating unique traditions as a single parent living in an extended household with my son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. It is about teaching my granddaughter to think about others, including those who may have less.

Christmas is about putting the concept of giving into tangible action. And yes, the spirit of giving can be maintained all year round. However, there's still something magical about so many people coming together to give to each other before a new year rolls around.

I see Christmas as the hope of a world that cares about more than the self. Not just about our family but yours. This time of year, our attention is drawn to those who lack family support or the material resources for even the basic needs in life. It is a time of hospitality and generosity.

A few years ago, a friend gave my granddaughter a book called "Secret Santas and The Twelve Days of Christmas Giving." It is about a young girl secretly doing something special for someone for the 12 days of Christmas. When we first got the book, it was right after Christmas. Although disappointed she missed Christmas, my 9-year-old granddaughter loved the book so much that she decided to do something each month of the coming year for a particular person. I was thrilled when she chose "Mike," a homeless gentleman in our town who was always kind to us and everyone he encountered. She had always worried about him. She was concerned he may not have enough to eat or whether he was warm enough. So each month, she used her money and a few dollars from me to buy him something she thought he might need. We left the items monthly at a pizza restaurant we knew he frequented because he usually could afford at least one slice.

Over the year, we left socks, a blanket, sweatpants, and shoes (we found out his size from someone in the restaurant who cleverly got the information from him). He carried all of his possessions on a cart, and when we found out that it had broken, we pooled our money and bought him a new one. At the end of the year, we met him at the restaurant, gave him his Christmas gift, and revealed that Eden (my granddaughter) was his Secret Santa. When he found out his benefactor was a 9-year-old girl, he was very thankful and kind in responding to her. I don't know if I have ever seen her happier. Since then, his veteran assistance has come through, and he has a small place to live. However, living on the street is still in his blood, and from time to time, we see him in town, and there is still so much love there.

So now, each year, the two of us create bags with toiletries, snacks, and items the homeless can use and place the items in inexpensive drawstring backpacks along with a note of encouragement. We do this all year, not just at Christmas. Instead of giving money to those we encounter who are down on their luck, we hand them our Secret Santa bag, which is named after the story that inspired the act.

LIZ CHAMBERS  
VICE PRESIDENT OF ASSOCIATE ENGAGEMENT