

## **Project Uplift starts collecting for holidays**

*Organizer continues tradition  
started by her father*

**By Elizabeth Ross White**

Correspondent

Carol Pallazola was struggling during last year's holiday season. A single mother and recently laid off from work, she wanted her young son, Sam, to have something for Christmas. She turned to Project Uplift, and she felt the warm embrace of a caring community.

Through the program, Sam received a motorized race car, a backpack designed with the movie "Cars" characters, and a fun, monkey-shaped pillow. "They were so good about age-appropriate toys for a 2-year-old," says Pallazola. Project Uplift "is a wonderful program that really helped me out in a time of need. We're lucky to have this in the community."

For more than 25 years, Project Uplift, sponsored by Gloucester-based Action, Inc., has helped supply toys to children of families in need during the holiday season. Through the help of individual volunteers and local businesses and institutions, the program brightens the holidays of those in the Cape Ann region. Last year, the program served about 250 families and nearly 500 children in Gloucester, Rockport, Essex, Manchester and Ipswich.

The need to support struggling families is as important as ever, says program director Ellen Petrilli. Though the economy is slowly improving, the unemployment rate is still high. Low-income families aren't making ends meet. "Gas is up. Oil is up. People are still going to need money," says Petrilli. "For someone getting \$10 to \$12 an hour, they live check to check. It's not going to change for them."

Project Uplift "alleviates the pressure on parents," says Petrilli. With bills to pay for heat, electricity, and rent, parents "don't have to make a choice between paying the bills and buying toys for their children."

Petrilli, who is serving as Project Uplift's new director this year, comes with a long legacy of experience. Her father, Bill Rochford, recently retired in June after serving more than three decades as the executive director of Action, Inc.

While there, Rochford initiated the Project Uplift program. "I've grown up watching my father help people," Petrilli says. The oldest of six children, she remembers helping her father deliver food to needy families as a child. "I can remember being in the back of a truck and helping him pass it out," she says.

Project Uplift volunteers are placing special drop-off boxes this week for donated toys for children (up to age 13) at more than 60 locations throughout the Cape Ann region. Toy donations will not be accepted after Dec. 11.

Volunteers and community residents can help Project Uplift celebrate the season of giving when Sen. Bruce Tarr arrives at Cape Ann Savings Bank in a Winnebago as part of his annual toy drive on Thursday, Dec. 10. Tarr will gather toys for Project Uplift while Santa and Mrs. Claus will greet visitors. The bank is located at 109 Main St. and 38 Rogers St., Gloucester.

Meanwhile, in the coming weeks, Petrilli will be looking for volunteers to help pick up toys and to help bag them for client families. This year, Bank-Gloucester at 160 Main St. is donating office space (on the Pleasant Street side of the bank) as a drop-off and pick-up center for volunteers.

Project Uplift requests that donated toys be new, without wrapping paper. Age-appropriate toys can then be checked and bagged for the specific needs of families. Clients, or families in need, must fill out an application with the ages and sexes of their children by Dec. 11.

This year, Petrilli is hoping to recruit children volunteers as part of a new "Kids Helping Kids" initiative. West Parish Elementary School principal Jean Perry will be encouraging students at the school to participate in Project Uplift. Other elementary school principals may encourage their students to participate as well. "It's pretty awesome that the kids will be helping other kids," Petrilli says.

In years past, many donated toys for children aged 2 to 5, but there is a need for gifts for older children aged 8 to 13. "As the kids get up beyond 6 or 7 years old, they are more aware," says Tim Riley, executive director of Action, Inc. "They feel it more if they are not having a good Christmas."

Businesses and institutions help by allowing the placement of drop-off boxes around Cape Ann. Last year, 46 businesses participated. Check out future issues of the *Beacon*, as well as our Web site, [wickedlocal.com](http://wickedlocal.com), for a list of dropoff locations.

Cape Ann Savings Bank has donated money for Project Uplift, which is used for purchasing gift cards for older children up to age 13. The Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce is donating gift certificates that can be used for a list of local businesses and restaurants as well.

Help comes from many different places. Foster's from Gloucester and Hiltz Moving & Storage are donating drop-off boxes. And Seaside Graphics in Gloucester is donating signs for the boxes.

One company, Peabody-based Converge, a high-tech firm that specializes in global supply chain management, collects more than 250 toys for Project Uplift. The company actually rents a small truck to deliver them. "It's a big community event, and everyone helps," says Petrilli.

As for individual volunteers, each year more people are helping. Action, Inc. board member Loretta Peres has volunteered her time for the past seven years. Once a recipient of Project Uplift gifts, Peres decided to participate one year.

An older gentleman was working on the project at the time. "When I went down to help, he appeared to be overwhelmed, and I stayed to help him. And it just stuck. I continued to help."

Volunteering has been such a positive experience, she says. "Seeing the faces of the recipients and hearing their stories" is such a wonderful way to connect with others, she says. "That's the pay you get."

Peres recalls one cold night when a grandmother entered the office where volunteers were working. The woman was freezing; she was wearing a light coat with no hat or gloves. She explained that her daughter, a sin-

gle mother, had a broken leg as well as other physical problems. There wasn't enough money to buy toys for her grandchildren.

"We started making up a bag for her," says Peres. The volunteers gave her a scarf, hat, and mittens as well as some other gifts. "And she was so grateful for those items. I don't know how she came across us" during that cold night.

Program recipients are touched by the thoughtfulness of their neighbors. "I can't wait for the day when I can do this for someone else," says Pallazola, referring to the gifts her son received last year at Christmastime.