

But for the grace of God, there go I

What would you do if a family member, a co-worker, neighbor or friend told you that they had just told their children that Santa Claus would not be coming to their house this year?

That something had happened in their life that financially ruined them. It might be a sickness, an accident, death of a family member or just a plain loss of a job. Their kids knew Santa from the years past. Sometimes he would just leave a few basic necessities and other years their dreams came true.

But this year there would be nothing, no new socks to replace the old ones that had holes in them. There wouldn't be shirts or pants, the old ones and the hand-me-downs must make do. Even though the cold winds of winter are upon us, there is no money for outerwear. Toys, books and tapes are definitely out of the question. The only thing the parents can give this year is love. Yes, it might suffice but it won't wipe away the sight of the youngsters' faces when they come down the stairs Christmas morning and find that Santa missed them.

Over the last 16 years, almost 1,500 kids have not had to suffer this disappointment. Instead, they have found that Santa, through the efforts of "The

Group," have made their Christmas something extra special.

"The Group" is an organization that comes together voluntarily each year to provide Christmas for kids whose parents normally can do so, but this year can't. There is no formal structure to "The Group." There are no membership cards, no officers and most important, no administrative costs. "The Group" pools their resources and reaches out to others for donations. The monies raised are used exclusively to purchase the necessities, the items of joy and food for the family.

This year, we are attempting to provide Christmas for over 50 families, more, if we can raise the funds. The typical child, where circumstances warrant, will receive socks and underwear, pants and shirts, sweaters, shoes and a coat, if needed. There will be a few toys, books or minor electronic games. Each item will be personally purchased, boxed and wrapped.

The volunteer shoppers are given the child's first name, their age and their sizes. They are given a limited budget that, under normal circumstances, will only pay for half their needs. Using their shopping skills and, occasionally, the generosity of the re-

tailers who will give special discounts, they are able to double their purchasing power. The items are brought to a central location, where they are inventoried and segregated by child and family.

A few days before Christmas, a hundred or more volunteers will box and wrap each individual item. The gifts are labeled with the child's name and a code and they are bagged for delivery. We attempt to make the delivery when the children are not home. In many cases, the first awareness the parents have of the good fortune they are about to receive is a call from a member of "The Group" setting up a delivery schedule. The gifts are delivered to the parents and they give them out to the children either as gifts from the parents or from Santa Claus. There are no markings or identification as to the source.

The recipient's identity is kept confidential. Only a few members of "The Group" who have checked out the need for the families know who they are or the circumstances surrounding their eligibility. The gifts are given anonymously. The parents never have to wonder who their benefactors were.

Last year over 500 Suffolk County residents donated to "The Group" ef-

fort. Because we do not spend one penny on administrative costs, they did not receive any individual recognition of their contributions. The cost of doing this, we estimate, would be about \$2 per contributor and we feel it is more important that this money be spent on the kids.

Many of the same folks who were instrumental in the creation of "The Group" have remained faithful workers and contributors over the last 16 years. They voluntarily put in about a half-dozen hours and often 10 times that amount, each year.

You may ask, why would people do this year after year? Why would you reach deep into your pocket, despite the needs of your own family? Why put up with the stress and the strain and the hours that are needed? Each of us has our own reason. It could be that one great Christmas we all remember. It might be the years when Santa could not make it to our house. It may be that we are grateful for the blessings we are enjoying and feel the need to reach out to someone unknown and share our fortunes.

Many of us who have been in "The Group" have commented about that special peace you feel on Christmas morning as you envision your efforts unfolding for the little children who were told they were going to be forgotten. You imagine seeing their joyful faces. You see the parents light up in a world of darkness that has overcome them. You hope that this Christmas you have taken part in giving and it will be a changing point in their lives as they realize that yes, God does love them and special people He has put on this earth are reaching out to help those that are not as fortunate.

If you would like to join "The Group" by making a contribution, you can send it to "The Group," c/o of Suffolk Life Newspapers, PO Box 167, Riverhead, NY 11901.

We can only promise you one thing. Every penny raised will be spent on the kids, not a cent will be spent on administrative costs, on boxes, wrapping paper or ribbons as they are all donated. Please join us if you can.

And why not?

Knuckle brush artists

County Executive Robert Gaffney this week announced a war on graffiti artists. It is about time and we hope that the effort is real, and not just another dumb publicity stunt.

Grffiti is a sickness of our society. There is nothing artistic or pretty about it. It represents urban/suburban decay. Most graffiti is an expression by the person, oftentimes it is a signature readily identifiable.

The police have a tendency to hohum this destruction. They have better things to do than to chase down a kid with a spray can or a magic marker. As

the graffiti is often identifiable, the culprit should be easy to find. The courts are too often lenient and the kids get off with a slap on the wrist. The police ask, why bother? The pattern repeats itself.

We suggest that the courts take a new approach. The culprits should be awarded an artist's smock and an old-fashioned knuckle brush. The smock should be colored orange--bright, brilliant orange--so that it would please the artist's taste and be identifiable a city block away. Down the back of the orange smock should be a Day-Glo yellow stripe that will equate with the

cowardice of the perpetrator, who usually sneakily performs the artwork under cover of darkness.

Once properly identified and clothed, the convicted perpetrator should be forced to use the knuckle brush to remove graffiti in bright daylight for all to see. We are sure that these would-be artists would quickly learn through humiliation and the work of removing paint that this crime does not pay. We would have a cleaner, better community and the perpetrators might learn it's more fun to give than to get.

And why not?

It's time for action or investigation

Suffolk County legislators, in recent times, have expressed great concerns for the taxpayers of the county in terms of budget cuts and county car lease costs. Well, legislators may have an opportunity soon to prove there is substance to their words, or if they are nothing more than political rhetoric.

Resolution No. 1732-94, a proposed local law that would require competitive bidding for all mass transportation contracts has been stalled in the legislature's Parks and Public Works Committee since this past summer. It was laid on the table at a legislative meeting on August 16.

The resolution is not new to county legislators. There have been previous resolutions which would put county transportation out to public bid, but legislators have rejected the proposal each time it has surfaced. Suffolk Life has called for putting the transportation contracts out to public bid for many years, but those words have fallen on deaf ears.

In a state audit of county government, New York State Comptroller H. Carl McCall criticized the county for the

lack of bidding on its transportation contracts. A recommendation included in that audit stated, "In order to help assure the prudent and economic use of public monies and to facilitate the acquisition of these services with the required quality at the lowest cost, county officials should solicit competitive proposals for these services. Furthermore, the county should require that the proposals include the cost for individual routes in order to properly evaluate the proposals..."

The audit also noted that "the county executive's (Robert Gaffney) recommended county budget for 1994 states, 'In order to assess comparable costs for the provision of transportation services, competitive bidding for some bus routes will commence in 1994.'" Gaffney did, indeed, promise to seek competitive bids, and requests for proposals (RFP) were solicited for two county routes. But when the RFPs came back, all were rejected. Opposition to seeking competitive bids for the county's transportation system has come from several legislators who are said to have close ties with the owner of one of the bus companies now under contract with the county. When the call for

competitive bids was first raised, the head of the county's transportation system, Gerald Cronin, quietly renewed the contracts with the operators of the county bus route system for an additional three years, which effectively stalled action on the bidding proposals.

Since that time, the county has put pre-kindergarten transportation out to public bid and saved in the area of \$3 million. The William Floyd School District put their transportation needs out to public bid and saved millions as well. As an example of these savings, William Floyd pays \$32,000 for each eight-hour bus, while the Sachem School District pays, under a contract, \$45,000 for the same bus, from the same company. But still the county legislators have done nothing about the opportunity to save taxpayer dollars. Instead, the county renews its contractors with the same bus companies year after year after year.

When the Gaffney administration involved itself in a car leasing deal with an out-of-state company, all hell broke loose. Legislators, and we believe rightfully, questioned motives and contracts and costs. They eventually hired a special

counsel to fully investigate the matter. The theme of those actions focused on claims of a "sweetheart deal" and suspicions of wrongdoing.

If legislators fail to move the competitive bidding resolution from committee, and do not approve the measure, we think the special counsel should expand the investigation into how the county transportation system is operated as well.

Failing in that, we would suggest District Attorney James Catterson consider launching an investigation into the matter. It has already been proven that competitive bidding can reap great savings. Why shouldn't county taxpayers have an opportunity to enjoy similar savings. This issue has been allowed to fester for too long, while taxpayer dollars are wasted, worthwhile programs are cut, and business as usual continues. It's time to act "to help assure the prudent and economic use of public monies and to facilitate the acquisition of these services with the required quality at the lowest cost," as the state comptroller says, or investigate why the legislators refuse to do so.

And why not?

We are taking the chance

We have got some good news and some bad news. Normally by this time, we have closed off what we would do with "The Group" Christmas appeal. After last week's editorial, we were made aware of several cases of desperate need that we can't ignore.

The bad news is that we are about 10% behind in contributions. The treasury is virtually depleted. After reading the letters and doing the verifications, a small group of us decided to throw all caution to the wind. We have personally given more than we had planned and have pledged additional funds, if the donations do not come in to make up for the shortfall.

Some of these families just have to

be helped. In good conscience, none of us want to abandon them in their desperate hour of need.

For those of you who do not know about The Group, we are just a bunch of ordinary people from very varied walks of life. For the last 16 years we have helped families who are normally able to provide Christmas for their children. This year, because of circumstances that would impact on any of us, they must tell their children Santa can't come this year.

We pool our own personal resources, and with the help of hundreds of others, we make sure Santa arrives. We provide for all the needs of the children—outerwear, shirts, pants, socks, underwear, toys and books. The gifts are given anon-

ymously. The children never know that the parents did not provide the presents.

The parents do not know our identity other than The Group. Members of The Group, except for those who verify the needs and those who deliver, do not know the last names or addresses of the people they are helping. No one ever has to say thank you.

Not one cent that The Group raises is spent on administration or overhead costs. There are no offices or administrators. Everything is volunteered or donated. Every child is shopped for individually. Every present is boxed and gift-wrapped with care. A guardian angel provides these supplies. The Group is not incorporated. No tax deduction for time, effort or contributions is received.

The Group efforts are pure. No one gets or receives anything for their efforts or involvement, except an immense satisfaction for having helped someone in a time of need.

We operate under a simple motto, "But for the grace of God, there go I." If you have been fortunate this year, and would like to take part, you may make a contribution by sending it to The Group, c/o of Suffolk Life Newspapers, PO Box 167, Riverhead, NY 11901.

Those that are in the inner circle are going "out on a limb" because they are unable to say "no." They have faith that there are people who will join them in their efforts and determination to help those in desperate need.

And why not?

Legislative secrecy must end

New York State taxpayers got some welcome news in a recent ruling by the New York State Court of Appeals which declares legislators can no longer refuse to disclose how much they spend on mail sent to constituents. That ruling, hopefully, could lead the way to fuller disclosure in other areas of legislative spending on its own behalf.

The unanimous ruling by the state's highest court came as a result of a suit by a Manhasset attorney who ran unsuccessfully against Senator Michael Tully (R-Roslyn Heights) in 1992. The attorney, Michael Siris, sought under the Freedom of Information (FOI) law to learn the number of mailings Tully had sent out, and at what

cost. The Senate refused to provide the information, claiming that in 1977 legislators voted to exempt themselves from some of the requirements of the FOI law. The court ruled, however, that mailing records must be disclosed. Legislative mailings have long been the target of complaint by those who challenge incumbent legislators who, the challengers insist, intensify the frequency of the mailings during election years, mailings which are little more than campaign literature sent out at taxpayer expense.

The mailings, however, are but the tip of the iceberg. In a recent series of articles entitled "Secrets of the Chamber," the Syracuse Herald-American, following a year-

and-a-half investigation, revealed how the members of the New York State Legislature—which enjoys a \$177 million budget—spend your hard-earned tax dollars.

The two-week series of articles reported how the legislature pads its \$130 million payroll with at least 800 political party officers, many working part-time but getting full benefits; that one in 10 legislators has a son, daughter, husband, wife or other relative on the payroll; and some legislators receive pensions that are twice the salary of the average central New York resident.

The articles report how legislators use your money to pay higher-than-market rents for office space, while steering rentals

to contributors and political cronies; how legislators take special tax breaks that save them thousands of dollars; revealed how taxpayers pay millions for three duplicate radio and television studios that produce canned interviews with legislators for local broadcast, and how some lawmakers take trips as far as China, Australia and Hungary—junkets paid for by private groups. In the winter, the newspaper reports, lawmakers head south at taxpayer expense.

The information contained in the Syracuse Herald-American series cries out for a full investigation into the wasteful spending habits of the state legislature. State Comptroller H. Carl McCall has indicated he plans to conduct an audit of the legislature's financial affairs, which would be the first time legislative spending has received such scrutiny. We sincerely hope that McCall, who won election to a full term last month, carries through on that promise. If he has the taxpayers' interests at heart, as he insisted during the election campaign, he will make that audit a top priority.

Opening the doors of the legislature to full scrutiny, taking away the privilege of secrecy in their activities is a step in the right direction. It's time to open the doors, and the books, for full scrutiny. It's time the legislators and their leaders realize they are there to do the people's business, and to spend the people's taxes as wisely and efficiently as possible. That, in essence, is the message delivered by the people on Election Day. They had better heed that message.

And why not?

Gambling: It's a crapshoot

Governor-elect George Pataki has dropped his opposition to the proposal for casino gambling in New York State. He now supports allowing the legislature to debate the issue and if it successfully passes in a legislative vote two years in a row, the question will be put to the voters in a referendum.

People are already lining up on both sides of the issue. They should, for the consequences are enormous. Under the current New York State statutes, casino gambling is not allowed. Casino gambling is available in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Foxwood in Connecticut and on two Indian reservations in upstate New York. The federal government allows casino gambling on nationally recognized Indian reservations, which are exempt from local regulations.

The Indians have moved aggressively in opening and expanding casinos. They draw thousands of people daily, provide a huge employment base and have been highly profitable. None of these profits are returned to the state. The land is not taxable, nor are the proceeds from the casino gate as they are at horse tracks. The only benefit the state gets out of the Indian-owned casinos is the boost to tourism.

Many New Yorkers go out of state to patronize these casinos. We live in a mobile society. If we don't have what we want here, we go elsewhere at the drop of a hat.

New York State currently permits gambling at horse tracks, OTB (Off-Track Betting) parlors, bingo games and, of course, the lottery. Many people take part in weekly games of poker and craps that are held in homes and closed clubs. The book-

ies still operate underground and, of course, the state is denied any cut of their operation.

There are those who oppose gambling on moral and religious grounds. Their numbers are large, their influence larger. They will have an opportunity to have their say in the legislative hearings and when the issue comes up for a vote.

If the issue passes the legislature two years in a row, it will be debated statewide, and then you and I will have the final say in the voting booth in 1997. That's the way it should be.

There's gold in those hills

If you notice a grin on our faces, it is there for a reason. We have always operated on the premise that problems are only opportunities in disguise. For almost the past decade, as town officials were wringing their hands in frustration over the garbage issue, we kept saying, "Garbage can be an asset, there's gold in those hills." Most governmental officials looked at us as if we were nuts. All they could see were the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) mandates and the expensive methods of complying with the decrees.

Our grin, last week, came from reading the reports that the towns of Brookhaven and Babylon were involved in a bidding war for the ash from Islip Town's incinerator. Because of this competition, tipping fees came down almost overnight by over a

third, and may drop more when the dust settles.

What was one man's garbage is now another man's treasure. Old newspapers that municipalities were paying to have hauled away are bringing up to \$80 per ton on the open market. The price for recycling glass, metal and plastic has been steadily moving up. Where once no demand existed, there now is a market. What is left is a small fraction of the original waste stream, not enough to feed the huge incinerators that some municipalities locked themselves into supporting.

Some towns guaranteed a specific tonnage of garbage flow for 30 years. If they don't provide the garbage, they must pay penalties. We editorialized repeatedly about the foolishness of entering into such a long-term program. We warned that when the markets developed, the trash

would be separated and sold to the highest bidder. Because of the state DEC's mandates, the cost of handling garbage has become one of the towns' biggest expenses. To complicate this problem, many municipalities tried to profit from the garbage crisis by setting tipping fees unrealistically high, using the excess revenue to feed the growing government demand for revenue. This was just a shell game to make it appear that taxes were stable, while the same politicians were just taking your money out of another pocket.

It's a sorry mess we are in. Although the decisions were made by the politicians, it is we, the taxpayers, who will be responsible for these mistakes. If only they had listened.

And why not?