

The Little Elves Bring Holiday Cheer

by Jarmila Dokladalova

"I did not want to say my name, so I said: 'It is from The Little Elf,'" explains Sylvain Duhamel of The Little Elves Foundation (La Fondation Les P'tits Lutins). "From that moment, I kept saying it all the time. It is the magic of Christmas. If someone that does not know me sends me a gift and takes the time to wrap it, that means that there is some kindness in this world that we do not have enough of anymore. That can give you hope about everything else."

The Little Elves are a volunteer force 125 strong who are busy at work planning to distribute 1,600 gifts throughout Canada to people living with AIDS in specialized homes, often without family and friends who play such an important role in observing the holidays. They collect donations for the gifts, and this year, their goal is to raise \$10,000. To this day, anonymity remains at the core of the foundation's vision, and when making a delivery, "The Elves" only use their first name, although Sylvain had revealed his full identity on the web site to "give credibility."

The idea came to Sylvain fourteen years ago after his brother died of AIDS. His family and friends were with him until the end, and after he passed away, Sylvain realized just how much harder such an ordeal is for those who are alone. "I felt bad knowing this," he reflects. "So, I decided on my own to buy some gifts and delivered them to two houses. I kept it to myself for six years because I was not looking for recognition but for something to just to help."

It was his sister who convinced him eight years ago to get others involved so he could reach more people. "The happiness that I saw with those coming in as volunteers made me think that we could make it a little bigger," confesses Sylvain about the volunteer force that year, which totaled fifteen totaled fifteen.

Although The Elves made deliveries mainly in and around Montréal in their early years, they have expanded to their distribution network to include homes as far away as The Yukon, Vancouver,

Calgary, and Halifax as well as numerous other cities in Québec. In the Ottawa area, The Elves make a stop at both Bruce House and BRAS.

The weekend of December 11 will be a busy one. The Elves will need to sort through the presents that they have bought and decide which gifts will go to which homes, matching up age and gender of the recipient if necessary, and then wrapping the gifts. In the case of those that will be sent outside of the metropolitan area, they also need to make sure that a local contact is on hand to receive the shipment. While The Elves insist on anonymity by using only their first names, they nevertheless insist on a personal touch, seeking to have an elf from that area pick up the shipment and then deliver it personally to the home in the early afternoon on December 24. For the first time, the gift-wrapping will take place at a nearby CEGEP instead of Sylvain's home. There are simply too many presents.

Most of the gifts are in the seven and eight dollar range. "Our goal is not to give big gifts," says

Sylvain. "It is more to reach people. It is about the magic of Christmas. You do not need to spend fifty dollars to be touched by a gift." Most of the presents the elves dispense are of a practical nature: hats, gloves, blankets, perhaps a vase or a box of cookies – just a gesture to show the magic of Christmas abounds even in the bleakest of times.

The Elves have also given new meaning to the often dreaded term "hit and run."

Sylvain explains: "We go on Ste. Catherine or any street that we know has homeless people and when we see someone, we get out of the car approach the person to give them the gift. 'It is from The Little Elf,' we will say. In a house, a volunteer may receive the gift, but here you see the reaction of the person right away. You see the faces of the people watching the volunteer do it and the person getting the gift. It is a triple effect and see you can easily do something that can make a difference."

Although The Little Elves have grown steadily and incorporated

two years ago as a charity, Sylvain stresses that they want to grow slowly so they do not lose sight of their core mission. "If an organization grows too fast, it loses its original focus, he explains. That is where we have to be careful. "I do not see us as United Way or Farha. They are a distributor of money, although Fraha has always been a model for me. I did the walks since the beginning, and Ron Farha was a good friend of my brother's."

However, the focus on careful growth has not stopped Sylvain from sharing a larger vision of what The Elves could do. He would like to establish contacts in the U.S. and numerous other countries with like-minded volunteers who could also distribute gifts in the same spirit, although he stresses they would need to work independently because of each country's tax laws. Already, The Elves have opened up "an office" in Paris and are heading into their third year of activity.

And, as for The Elves in Canada, in a few years, Sylvain would like to see the organization also give presents on other occasions throughout the year: Valentine's Day, Easter, an individual's birthday, or for no reason at all. "Valentine's is depressing when

you are single and even worse if you are sick," he stresses.

Sylvain concedes that there are sad aspects of the project: "You see the side you do not want to see, the houses that have been closed because of a lack of funding, but you know that the people are still out there that need help... If someone is sick with AIDS, he might not be happy about the situation and he might not be joyful in front of you. It is something you have to understand. Sometimes the volunteers are not prepared. I remember my brother was in a bad mood; he did not know if he would make it through Christmas."

Sylvain's work with The Little Elves has also had an influence on how his own family celebrates the holiday season. "We had exchanged gifts for a certain amount, but we brought it down. I do not believe in expensive gifts anymore," he concludes. "I believe in the thought of doing something, but whatever it is, as long as you are doing it with your heart, that will make the difference."

