

Little Elves spend weekend wrapping 5,000 gifts for people living with AIDS

"Every gift has a card and someone signs every one and includes a Joyeux Noël or Merry Christmas. So they don't feel alone. Even though they don't know us, they know that someone thought of them."

ANDY RIGA ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/ANDYRIGA](https://montrealgazette.com/author/andyriga)) Updated: December 8, 2019



Sylvain Duhamel, Chief Elf Officer (CEO) of the Little Elves Foundation, and helpers wrap gifts for isolated or underprivileged people on Saturday, Dec. 7, 2019. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Wearing wide yellow suspenders under a red apron, white-bearded chief elf Sylvain Duhamel is standing in a corner overseeing his workshop: a classroom at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf.

Gifts are piled on tables along the walls. For adults, they include blankets, socks, puzzles, notebooks, reusable cups and tins of cookies; for children, games, dolls, dominoes, candy and colouring books.

It's Saturday morning and, as an assistant wearing a pointy green hat plays White Christmas on a piano, Duhamel and dozens of volunteers are scrambling. They have only two days to wrap 5,000 presents.

The brightly colored boxes must be ready by early Monday when trucks will carry them to 55 hospices and community organizations across Canada that help isolated and underprivileged people living with HIV-AIDS.

Duhamel, founder of the Little Elves Foundation, started the annual tradition anonymously and on a much smaller scale during the Christmas of 1991, soon after his brother Alain died of AIDS at age 31.

“I had been there for him for the two years he was sick,” Duhamel said during a break in the gift-wrapping frenzy. “I missed my brother and I knew some people were alone, so I decided to do something for those who didn’t have anyone.”

So he bought gifts and showed up at the door of a few Montreal hospices.

“At the first house I visited, the guy who answered the door, a resident, asked me: ‘Who are the gifts from?’ And I wanted to be anonymous and add to the magic of Christmas, so I said: ‘A little elf,’ ” Duhamel recalled.

He kept his acts of kindness secret until six years later when he told his now-husband. They decided to tell others and the project has grown steadily since. In 2002, the foundation, a non-profit charitable organization, was created so tax receipts could be given to donors.

In the early years, the gifts were wrapped at Duhamel’s house. But by 2004, more than 1,000 were to be given out and new digs were found at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf in Côte-des-Neiges.

Over the past 28 years, more than 57,000 gifts have been handed out, not

including those about to be distributed.

The presents — average price: \$8 — are given to “people affected by HIV-AIDS who are in need,” he said. “We define ‘in need’ as lonely or poor.”

This year, 963 children will benefit. Presents will also go to several homeless shelters because some people living on the street have AIDS, Duhamel said.

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Businesses lend a hand. Two trucking companies, Transport Robert and Kindersley Transport, help with shipping. Jouets Choo Choo, a toy store, co-ordinates the purchase of discounted children’s gifts.

Little Elves raised \$40,000 this year to buy the presents. Half came from the sale of sweet and spicy nuts at a kiosk at Jean Talon Market’s Marché des Saveurs du Québec. The rest comes from donations.

“We buy as many gifts as we can with what we raise,” Duhamel said.

“The demand this year is for 5,800 at the organizations who have signed up, but we will only reach 5,000. There are 800 people who won’t get gifts, but all the kids are covered.”

The presents are stored at Duhamel’s home and were delivered to the school on Friday evening. Then, about 180 elves were to work from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday to prepare the gifts to be ready for shipping on Monday.

Once they’re on their way, the elves rest until next fall, though the organization accepts donations year-round.

Duhamel, a landscaper by day, said the situation has improved for people living with AIDS over the past three decades.

“It was very difficult when my brother died. He spent seven months in the hospital. It was a time when the doctors and nurses didn’t know what to do. Everything was experimental.

“There are treatments now. But people are still living with the loneliness of it because many are still rejected by their families. Christmas is a very difficult time.”

For more information about the Little Elves Foundation, visit littleelves.org (<http://littleelves.org>).

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A flyer for Mondou featuring a close-up of a husky's face in front of a Christmas tree. The text reads "Célébrez parce qu'il a été sage lui aussi." and "mon dou".

Hover for Flyer

A flyer for Famiprix showing various household and personal care products like Cashmere, Advil, and Lysol. The text includes "famiprix", "VENDRE ET GAGNER", and "Non-Laps".

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A flyer for Princess Auto featuring a 2-week sale, a "YULE LOVE THESE DEALS" section with a Santa Claus illustration, and a "STEAL DEAL" section with a "HOT BUY 888".

Hover for Flyer

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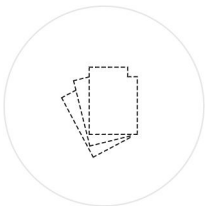


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