

Elves brighten up the holidays for AIDS patients

When Sylvain Duhamel's brother Alain died of AIDS 13 years ago at 31, he was surrounded by family and others who loved him.

Sylvain Duhamel wanted to do something in his brother's memory. He knew holidays can be a particularly bleak time for people who are sick, that for some who lived in residences or hospices for people with AIDS, there were no visitors – and no gifts.

Not everyone has a support circle. And particularly outside urban centres, the stigma around AIDS endures, he knew.

His plan, then, was to bring them Christmas gifts – modest ones, but gifts nonetheless. He contacted two Montreal residences for people with AIDS with his plan. "It was maybe 20 or 25 people, but I wanted for them to know someone was thinking of them."

For five years after that,



**SUSAN
SCHWARTZ**
LITTLE ELVES FOUNDATION

"Particularly outside urban centres, the stigma around AIDS endures, he knew."

Duhamel continued to buy, wrap and distribute gifts.

He expanded his gift list to include four or five Montreal-area residences and hospices. "It was my good deed."

Then he told his sister and some friends what he was doing – and they suggested others

might want to help. That year, they worked as a group, they were nine, – and they raised \$300.

Grassroots efforts sometimes have a way of expanding, and by last year, the group had grown to more than 100 volunteers who wrapped and distributed more than 1,500 gifts to residents of more than 40 AIDS hospices and residences across Canada.

In 2002, Duhamel's group was officially constituted as a non-profit organization known as the Little Elves Foundation – La fondation des p'tits lutins, in French.

Some of the gifts they give are donated to them, but most are purchased by the elves with the cash donated to the organization.

This year a total of about \$9,000 was raised.

Since 2002, the foundation has had charitable organization status and always, Duhamel said, 100 per cent of what is given goes



ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE
Marie-France Aubert and her 11-year-old daughter, Gabrielle, wrap gifts as part of the Little Elves Foundation.

toward the purchase, wrapping and delivery of gifts.

This year, for the first time, the project expanded beyond the con-

finances of Duhamel's home to a hall at Collège Brébeuf.

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The Gazette, Mon. Dec. 20th 2004



ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE
Michèle Caron of Sorel volunteers to wrap gifts for the Little Elves Foundation.

Schwartz | *Good deeds are contagious*

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Last weekend about 70 volunteers turned up to work as Little Elves, several of them in gaily coloured elves' caps.

Elves don't have last names, so name tags identified them by first name.

There was a bright, warm energy in the room as they worked: René-Pierre played carol tunes on the piano and Linda sang. Michelle had baked dozens of cookies and mini-muffins for the volunteers.

In two days they wrapped and decorated 1,600 gifts – throws and candles and mugs, chocolate bars, cologne, perfume and bars of soap – in lovely and imaginative ways, with

ribbons and ties and candies and gift cards identifying the Foundation as the sender.

Guy Aubé wrapped and then passed the packages across the table to his girlfriend, Sylvain's sister Guylaine Duhamel, who in turn decorated the packages with ribbons, bows and Christmas toys.

Some volunteers had come from out of town, like Michèle Caron of Sorel or Marie-France Aubert and her daughter Gabrielle, who live in Valleyfield. Gabrielle, who is 11, said she was having a lot of fun wrapping gifts because she knew were going to people who'd appreciate them.

The gifts themselves are relatively small.

"But they say 'Someone thought of me,'" Sylvain said. Often that's enough to make people happy," said Duhamel, 42.

The gifts were then packed into boxes and have been shipped across Canada, from Baie Comeau to Vancouver, Banff to the Yukon – in care of people Duhamel knows. They will in turn, see to it that they are delivered to the people for whom they're intended as close to Christmas Eve as possible.

Here in the Montreal area, Duhamel (or one of his elves) – will make sure the gifts are delivered to 23 different facilities. Some of the gifts are destined for children; in addition to peo-

ple who are infected with the virus that causes AIDS, there are those who are *affected* – and that includes children, he said.

For Duhamel, the main goal of the Little Elves Foundation is to help people with AIDS; another is to raise awareness of volunteer work and the satisfaction it can bring.

He has learned, he says, that "when you want to do a good deed, you realize it is contagious."

For more information, visit the foundation's Web site at www.littleelves.org

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