

Community helping community

Tamara Shepard, The Etobicoke Guardian
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It's a stop on Toronto Police Const. Bill Vollmar's patrol that's all about giving - and not speeding tickets or search warrants, either.

Instead of picking up perps, the 23 Division officer is picking up supplies: women's and children's clothing, books and backpacks, toys and sports equipment. The recipients - Jamestown and Mount Olive children and youth aided by neighbourhood social service agencies.

"(Merchants) will call me on my cell phone," Vollmar said, "and tell me, 'get a truck.'"

It began last fall when Vollmar, new to 23 Division's community response unit, joined the Etobicoke Strategy's "faith patrol" walks of pastors and police officers through the Jamestown and Mount Olive communities.

"Where I grew up (in Cambridge, Ont.), you take care of your own," Vollmar said. "This felt similar, like a small town, unique. It's great to be able to help organizations doing great work with supplies."

Walter McIntyre, outreach pastor with Kipling Avenue Baptist Church, said Vollmar just got it.

"He saw the potential of what could be accomplished with the Etobicoke Strategy," McIntyre said of Vollmar. "He sees what we're trying to do is bless the community. He said, '(police) have the capability, the resources, let's work together.'"

Elmbank Community Centre was the first recipient of much-needed furniture. Readers were quick to respond after the Guardian reported the need in January.

Since then, area merchants have donated an estimated "thousands of dollars" in items, including bicycles and skateboards.

Zellers in the Woodbine Centre was the first, donating sports equipment, school supplies, stationery and money from its employee-contributed social fund to the homework club at Kingsview Village Public School.

"To me, it was exactly what we should be doing in our neighbourhood," Jim Charles, store manager of Zellers Woodbine Centre said of the Etobicoke Strategy. "It keeps young people active, off the streets and on the straight and narrow."

Fellow Woodbine Centre anchor store Sears donated backpacks, 10 of which were given to It's In Me for its Camp United annual summer camp. In 2005, the agency got some 300 backpacks, most of which went to kids in Jamestown, said executive director Tracy Kato.

Recently, Home Depot proposed to donate paint - and painters - to repaint the gym and homework rooms used by Urban Promise for its child and youth programs run out of Thistleton Baptist Church. Already, the Christian agency's camp has gained donations of toys, school supplies and sports equipment.

Canadian Tire management at The Albion Centre has asked Vollmar for an agency wish list.

The latest recipients - women staying at Ernestine's Women's Shelter. "We filled up minivans," Vollmar said. "We handed over these brand new baby clothes, women's clothes, basic necessities. These women are fleeing; they likely don't have much. It was a nice bonus for them."

The officer's cell phone hasn't stopped ringing. The challenge - ensuring fair distribution, McIntyre said.

"What it really does is reinforces that we're right to be going out with the police," McIntyre said of the Etobicoke Strategy "faith patrols". "This isn't really happening in other parts of the city."