

# The Bergen Record

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### Ridgewood man puts on elf hat during holidays

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When the white door opened on Ridgewood resident Jim Gibney's garage last week, it revealed a scene of sheer holiday magic: Inside were more than 200 donated gifts, wrapped and ribboned, in boxes and bags, ready to fulfill children's wishes.

The gifts were destined for children with special needs served by Youth Consultation Services, which works with more than 1,400 children in New Jersey.

And Gibney's role? Call him "Chief Elf." This is the fifth year the Ridgewood father and his wife, Cheryl, have participated in the YCS gift drive known as the Secret Santa initiative. Each year his involvement, and his elf squad, grows. He's enlisted scores of friends to donate gifts.

"From Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, when I get a new child, he's the first call I make – he never says no," said Ruthie Harper, an executive director for YCS.



Ridgewood, NJ 12/9/16 Jim Gibney checking the contents of a donated gift. (Photo: Marion Brown/NorthJersey.com)

Ridgewood, NJ 12/9/16 Gifts piled up in the Gibney kitchen. (Photo: Marion Brown/NorthJersey.com)

Monday was the moment when time, planning and countless hours of work to collect and organize these gifts paid off.

Gibney, Cheryl, and a few helpers happily loaded up the sleigh-driver's truck, belonging to, and driven by, friend Dennis Murphy, with toys bound for Youth Consultation Services in Hackensack. There, the items will be wrapped and distributed to YCS programs throughout New Jersey.

Gibney's involvement with YCS goes back to his first meeting with representatives at a charity dance event at In The Spotlight in Waldwick, in

which his children danced. He signed on to be part of a mentor program at the Holley House in Hackensack, a YCS facility.

But when he caught wind of the gift drive initiative, he knew right away he wanted to be a part of it.

“[These kids are] no different from my three kids, they’ve just been thrown a curveball that’s a little hard to hit and they just need support,” said Gibney, speaking in his home last Friday.

And so a mission was born.

It all began with a simple email. Gibney reached out to 30 people asking for donations, and within several weeks, he had collected 50 gifts. That number has multiplied each year since. The response from donors has been enthusiastic, and Gibney now must field emails from elves asking when the drive begins.

The list of donors grew from a few friends in Ridgewood to people Gibney had not connected to in years – friends from elementary school and high school to whom he reached out on social media. He even enlisted his boss.

"They just trust in Jim, who trusts in us, that everything is going where it's supposed to go," offered the YCS's Harper.

As the gifts pour in, Gibney and his family find a place to temporarily store them in his home while he matches them to the proper child from a list provided by YCS. The gifts are tagged with the child's name and then placed in the garage. In the days before delivery, the Gibney home has toys filling the dining room and living room. For the first time this year, he had the use of a large, newly built garage, making storage much easier.

But no matter how much space Gibney may temporarily lose during the holiday season, there are no thoughts of reducing the number of gifts he tries to collect. In fact, he plans to bring in even more.

"It's so organic right now, it's so grass-roots," said Gibney. "Charity is local, that's what's so special about it. People get really excited about the child they're supporting. They don't know anything about the child, but they know this is their job."