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Free Spirit Van for Seniors

By Cathy Tyson

No, it wasn't Santa's elves that stuffed a van down a chimney to serve elders in the community. Thanks to the hard work of Lamorinda Senior Transportation Coordinator Mary Bruns a brand new 12-passenger wheelchair accessible Spirit Van was obtained, free of charge, bringing the fleet up to three vehicles.

In the past, Bruns was able to obtain a 5310 Federal Grant which covered all but 11 percent of the cost, which is shared by the City of Lafayette, the Town of Moraga and the Community Foundation of Orinda. This time around, she was able to secure the federal grant for most of the \$67,000 price tag, and in addition found state toll credits that paid for the balance of the cost. "It really helped," said Bruns.

The Spirit Vans are busy Monday through Friday, and most Sundays, taking seniors from Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda to lunch at the Walnut Creek Senior Center and to doctors' appointments, to church, on errands, and more. The brand new Spirit Van is naked – just waiting for a break in the weather so that signage decals can be affixed.

The newest van can seat a dozen ambulatory people or four wheelchairs plus six ambulatory people. Drivers volunteer their



Several of the Spirit Van drivers and dispatchers smile in front of one of three vans now servicing Lamorinda seniors. Photo provided

time in 4-hour shifts once per week, they also help passengers with packages and groceries to bring them into the house offering door through door service.

The Spirit Van has become increasingly popular with seniors; in fiscal year 2013-14 a grand total of 4,316 rides were delivered to older adults, more than double the amount of rides given when the program first started in 2006. In order to keep the program sustainable, rides generally cost \$5 for a one-way trip within Lamorinda and \$10 round trip; low income seniors get a discount equivalent to what they would pay on the County Connection bus. Those heading to the daily nutritious lunch program at the senior center, the lunch bunch, pay only \$2.50 each way. Lunch is a donation, and staff never say no.

The program has about a dozen drivers who volunteer their time "out of the kindness of their hearts," said Bruns, describing

them as a dedicated group. Former Spanish teacher at Miramonte High School then Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School, Gabriela Mozee became a driver this past September. "We receive many compliments from our passengers who love our drivers and don't know what they would do without us," said Mozee.

She was impressed by the level of preparation required to start the job that took roughly a month to complete. "Mary Bruns, the director, gave me a very thorough manual about vehicle inspection and fundamentals on vehicle driving; requested letters of recommendation; and scheduled practical driving lessons with experienced drivers/teachers, and arranged for a workshop on elder abuse."

Drivers and donations are always needed. For more information about donating to or volunteering with the Spirit Van, call (925) 283-3534.

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SENIOR HELPERS

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'Knucklehead Santa' and 'Chaz' Deliver More Than Gifts

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A surprise visit at an Oakland elementary school.

"Santa just shows up, unannounced," Cox said. "The kids' jaws drop. The first year we did this, the teacher said, with tears in her eyes, 'I didn't think anyone cared about us.' There are so many touching moments," Cox continued.

Last year, Smith noted, they expanded again, providing gifts for women and children living in a shelter for domestic abuse victims. This year, they've added a second domestic abuse shelter as well as a preschool for children suffering from personal trauma. "We receive lists of what these women and children need and want and farm them out to our ever-growing network of friends and family who are eager to help," Smith said.

OakLuv has joined forces with the Oakland Fire Department's Random Acts of Kindness group, helping to fulfill wishes expressed in letters kids write to the firefighters. With sincere emotion, Cox told of one letter received from a boy living in a shelter. "He said he didn't want anything for Christmas but he hoped his two younger brothers would get presents. Santa, Chaz and our elves knocked on the shelter door, asked to see this young man and showered him, his brothers and other shelter residents, with gifts."

The house on 38th Avenue is still the site of OakLuv's biggest party. The family puts out signs in the neighborhood announcing Santa's ar-

rival. Last year, more than 400 gifts were distributed and, Smith exclaimed, "there was a line of kids winding around a city block." There was a piñata and a mariachi band. This year they're hoping to have a fire truck in addition to their fleet of classic convertibles driving Santa and his elves around.

"This whole thing has taken on a life of its own, and it's very humbling," Cox said. Smith added that "seeing the joy on the faces of kids and parents is just incredibly powerful and moving." They both agreed that, "little ol' Alan and Alex" stumbled onto something bigger than they ever could have imagined and both have been dramatically changed.

To learn how you can help bring happiness to underprivileged families, go to www.oakluv.org.



"Knucklehead Santa" shares a hug.

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