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Local Salvation Army volunteers ring in the season collecting kettle donations

By Cathy Dausman



Coronet players Danny Grant, left, and Doug Madsen play for the Salvation Army kettle at Kmart. Photo Cathy Dausman

Jingling bells are part of the holiday season, especially when it comes to the Salvation Army. Six days weekly, eight hours daily, late November through Christmas Eve bell ringers work a bit of kettle magic, soliciting donations for the less fortunate.

This tradition dates back to 1891 in San Francisco, when Salvation Army Capt. Joseph McFee decided to provide free Christmas dinners for the poor. He rigged a crab pot on a tripod and stood at the Oakland ferry landing to collect donations.

Locally, kettle stations are staffed by a mix of volunteers from service organizations, church groups and even seasonal employees working for minimum wage. "We can't find enough (volunteer) help," explained Ralph Brigman, Salvation Army red kettle coordinator for central Contra Costa County. Brigman has been ringing bells for 50 years, starting in Michigan. He says money from East Bay kettles stays within the county to provide

food for 400 households monthly, underwrite music lessons, provide summer camp tuition, addiction recovery counseling and other Salvation Army services. A few Lamorinda volunteers recently shared their bell ringing stories. Like Brigman, many are in it for the long haul.

Doug Madsen has worked at red kettle sites since he was a student at Miramonte High School. But Madsen doesn't ring a bell - he plays coronet with music partner Danny Grant (also on coronet) at Concord's Kmart. Madsen was born into a Salvation Army family, grew up in Orinda and has caroled throughout the Bay Area. While some people don't like the bells, Madsen says they do like the music.

Since retiring, Madsen can devote more hours to Salvation Army work. On weekends he performs in his church music ensemble. "It's kind of cathartic," said Madsen, who had a career in law enforcement. "I used to 'protect and serve'," he said. "Now I just serve." He's not worried about playing a brass instrument outside in the cold, either, especially after comparing his lot with those who staff Salvation Army kettles in the upper Midwest, Canada and England.

Since Joe Haughin's parents were Salvation Army ministers, he says he was originally introduced under protest to bell ringing as a young boy. But 74 years later Haughin continues this work. Now when kettles are collected he counts the money, a process he says takes seven to 10 people two to three hours every other day. Haughin and his group are responsible for the contents of up to 35 kettles. "I could spend all evening telling stories (about emptying the kettles)," Haughin said.

Cheryl Collins is in her second year as a bell ringer but has admired kettle workers since childhood. A church bulletin notice attracted her attention last year. "I thought it would be a cool way to help people," she said. This year ringers are needed in Alameda, so that's where she'll be. Collins says she dances to keep warm, but don't ask her to sing: "I have a terrible voice," she said.

She remembers a teenage boy last year who walked by several times before finally making a donation. "He told me he thought he could go without a snack to help someone else," Collins said. The teen then pestered his friend until he too donated, and both boys left smiling. Collins also sees passers-by paying it forward for the help Salvation Army once gave them.

What else falls into those red kettles? Haughin sometimes sees foreign coins. "I realize we're a worldwide organization and the donors are well meaning, but no banks will take these coins," he said.

Brigman says he has seen South African Krugerrands and a diamond ring in a kettle (the rings sometimes dropping unintentionally) and Las Vegas kettles will get casino chips. Occasionally gold teeth or counterfeit money also goes into a pot.

Salvation Army kettles are now being staffed at Lamorinda Safeway stores, as well as nearby Raley's, Nob Hill and Lunardi's Markets. Bell ringers wear Salvation Army aprons; seasonal workers also wear photo IDs.

Brigman hopes to collect \$200,000 from his kettles this year, up from last year's \$173,000 but down from the \$250,000 the Salvation Army raised locally in 2008.

Brigman says there's still time to volunteer as a kettle ringer this year. Go to <https://volunteer.usawest.org/OpportunityDetail.aspx?ID=2970> or call (925) 676-6180, extension 14 for more information.

"Hopefully we're helping people," Haughin said.

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