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Two River Times

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Dancers from the Kathryn Barnett School of Dance performed at the Red Bank Town Lighting Nov. 27. See more photos on page 2. LYNNE WARD

Paying It Forward More Than Rewarding

By Muriel J. Smith

RED BANK – Their first names may be the same, both their hearts are big enough to explode and their never-ending efforts to help the less fortunate are just what Holiday Express is all about.

But how these two vivacious ladies got involved with this 23-year-old volunteer operation that brings laughter, charm, happiness and food all wrapped up in warm mittens and cozy hats and coats to thousands couldn't be any more different.

Patti Delaney can't remember exactly why, when and how she started volunteering for Holiday Express, but she candidly admits she came from an "Ozzie and Harriet" type of home where all the troubles were little ones, easily solvable at least as children they felt that way – and so she has an ingrown desire to help someone else in need.

Patricia Wotton recalls she first got involved as a means of overcoming the grief she and her family experienced after her husband, Rodney, father of her daughter and at the time unborn son, was killed at the World Trade Center Sept. 11, 2001.

Regardless, both pour their hearts and too many hours to count into working in the warehouse, serving meals at parties, dancing with guests, and doing any of the myriad other jobs that need to be done to ensure that



TINA COLELLA

Volunteer Patti Delaney enjoys bringing smiles to the guests at Holiday Express events.

Holiday Express remains at the high caliber its founder Tim McLoone has set.

Patti Delaney laughs when she explains the different jobs she's done. Then she shrugs and says simply, "whatever there is that has to be done at the time and I can do."

Delaney got involved about 10 years ago, hearing about Holiday Express and its ever constant need for volunteers from some friends, and wondering what it would be like to be part of a group

of so many who bring so much cheer and happiness to so many others who might otherwise never enjoy even a small bit of the holiday season. "I don't know why I started," she admits, "but once you're there, it's just the joy you see in people's faces when you do something for them. It's contagious."

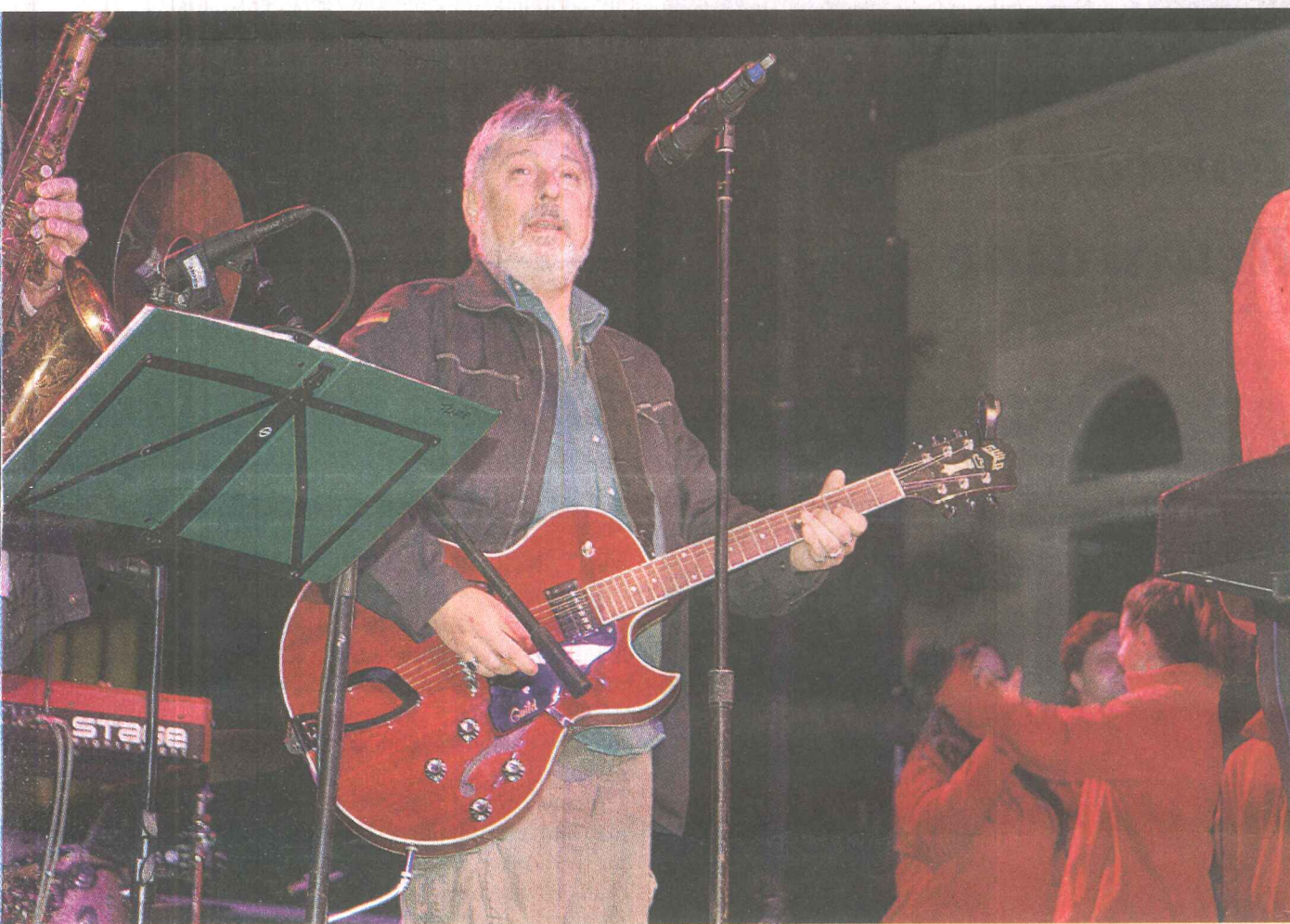
Holiday Express does some 80 events or more between October and Christmas Eve – there are three major events Christmas Eve, one in Asbury Park, two

in Newark – and each is different and geared to its specific audience. The idea is to bring smiles and joy to those who are either overlooked or neglected by so many other

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Red Bank Rings in the Holiday Season

By Lynne Ward



Forward

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good charities: the homeless, AIDS victims, the elderly, the teens with emotional problems, the mentally, physically or emotionally disturbed, the military in veterans hospitals, the forgotten. The smiles come through the music, dancing, singing and party food that are part of the entertainment, along with the gifts of necessities that range from toothbrushes and toothpaste to winter coats and New York Jets sweatshirts or hats. Because the audiences for these events are so diverse, so are the jobs necessary to make them a success. So Delaney might be in the kitchen cooking up a storm at one party, then out leading a Conga line of wheelchair residents in a rousing dance at another. Or she might be at the warehouse in Tinton Falls putting together the special Raffle Bags given out at some of the events and fulfilling the wishes of someone who made a list for Santa Claus. The raffle bags are geared to have "something special" for the recipient, but everyone in the group gets excited when they're announced.

Her ebullience is contagious and even Delaney admits it tugs at her heart when she surveys a room full of guests at the beginning of an event, seeing depression, perhaps boredom, a bit of

wistful thinking, maybe even non-recognition of what's going on. But by the end of the performance by Holiday Express's very talented music and dance performers, there are smiles, laughter, and hugs all around. "What's not to like about that?" she enthuses. She knows, as all the volunteers do, that for some, the Holiday Express visit is the only celebration they have. And it's obvious they look forward to it, she continues, because "the day after we're at a hospital or a shelter, we hear they're already talking about when we're coming for next year."

Delaney's significant other, Frank Tomaino, also gets involved with the Express goings-on, often being the face painter at parties, or taking on all the other jobs. They'll both be working at the Asbury Park gala on Christmas Eve that attracts upwards of 500 guests, many coming back year after year. Then, after hours on their feet there, they'll head home where — because Frank is Italian — they'll put together their own Christmas Eve Feast of the Seven Fishes, and host what could be as many as two dozen or so family members.

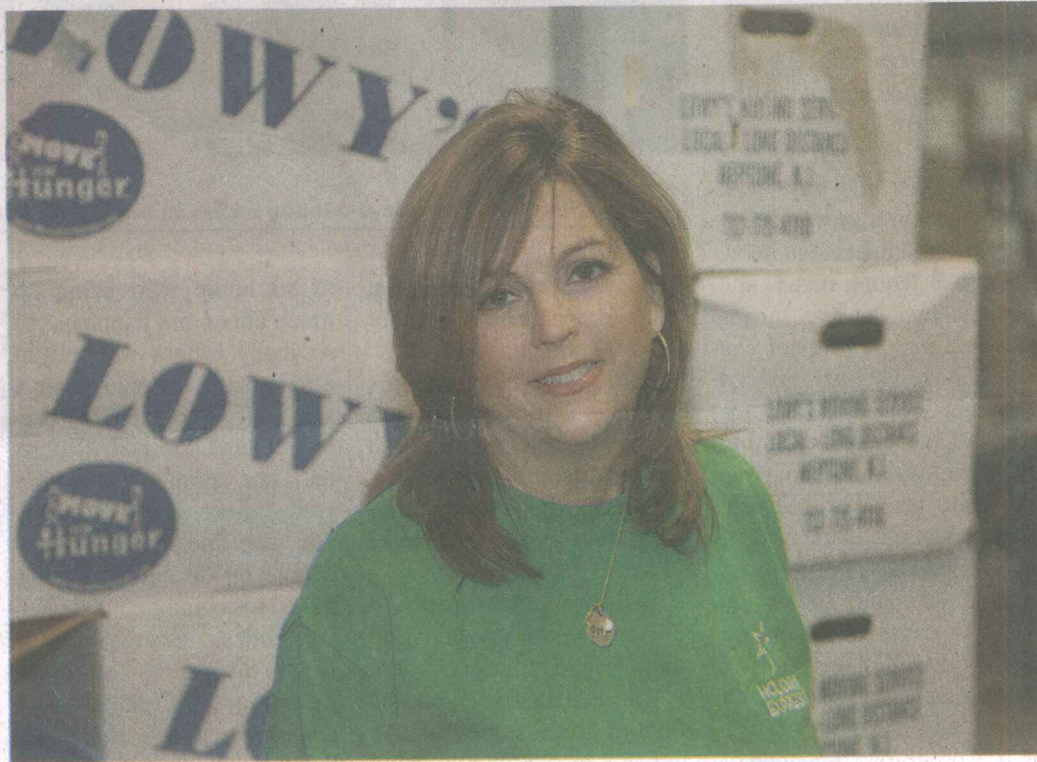
For Wotton, becoming a volunteer for Holiday Express seemed the natural thing to do to make her own holiday season a bit happier for her family. "It was the perfect way to get distracted," she says softly and practically.

"Helping others be happy is a great way to get on your own road to healing."

Wotton works tirelessly at the warehouse putting together the thousands of gift bags that are given out at every event. Recently nominated by the Junior League of Monmouth County for a Community Volunteer Award in their annual Women Making a Difference luncheon, Wotton is referred to as "Director of Warehouse Elves" because of the critical role she plays in each event's success. That means overseeing the inventory, packing and delivery of some 18,000 gift bags during the season, but also involved volunteering year round, just in extra abundance between October and Christmas Eve. She's identified as a motivational leader who sets high standards for herself and her team, and because of her skills and management ability, she has been able to keep pace with the huge jump in parties given and sites visited by Holiday Express since it first began.

She likes Holiday Express because "we visit the people no one else visits or remembers, in hospitals, drug and alcohol centers, rehabilitation institutions, soups kitchens." She downplays her role in all the work she does, saying simply, "I get so much more out of it simply by seeing how happy we can make people."

Holiday Express is the perfect volunteer spot, she



TINA COLELLA

Patricia Wotton, a faithful Holiday Express volunteer, oversees the packing of 1,800 gift bags at the warehouse.

continues, because "you can give as much or as little time as you want." Because her children are in school, Wotton does a lot of her volunteering around their schedules, but concedes she's at the warehouse "a lot, days, nights, weekends." Regardless, it's worth it all, she says with enthusiasm, just knowing I'm contributing something to make someone else happy." Another benefit she gets from the Express crowd — and one which came as a real surprise — was "realizing things about yourself that you didn't know."

Wotton was pregnant with the couple's second child on Sept. 11, 2001, and needed to pull herself away from the hostility that took her husband, and helping others was the perfect solution. And still is. She's also involved with Stephy's Place, another group of vibrant women who offer support to those absorbed in any kind of grief, be it from the loss of a spouse through death or divorce, or the illness or death of a child, separation from family. "It's just a quiet place for people to grieve," she describes the facility at 21 W. Front St., Red Bank.

Besides all of that, Wotton also serves on Holiday Express's Board of Trustees and serves as event manager when needed.

"It's just good to pay it forward," this dynamic leader with a quick smile and a hearty laugh explains. And Christmas Eve, Wotton's children will be with her for the last day of Holiday Express' happiness deliveries, and will then go to Christmas Eve Mass as a family, thankful for what they have, appreciative of what they can give, and an inspiration to any who know them.