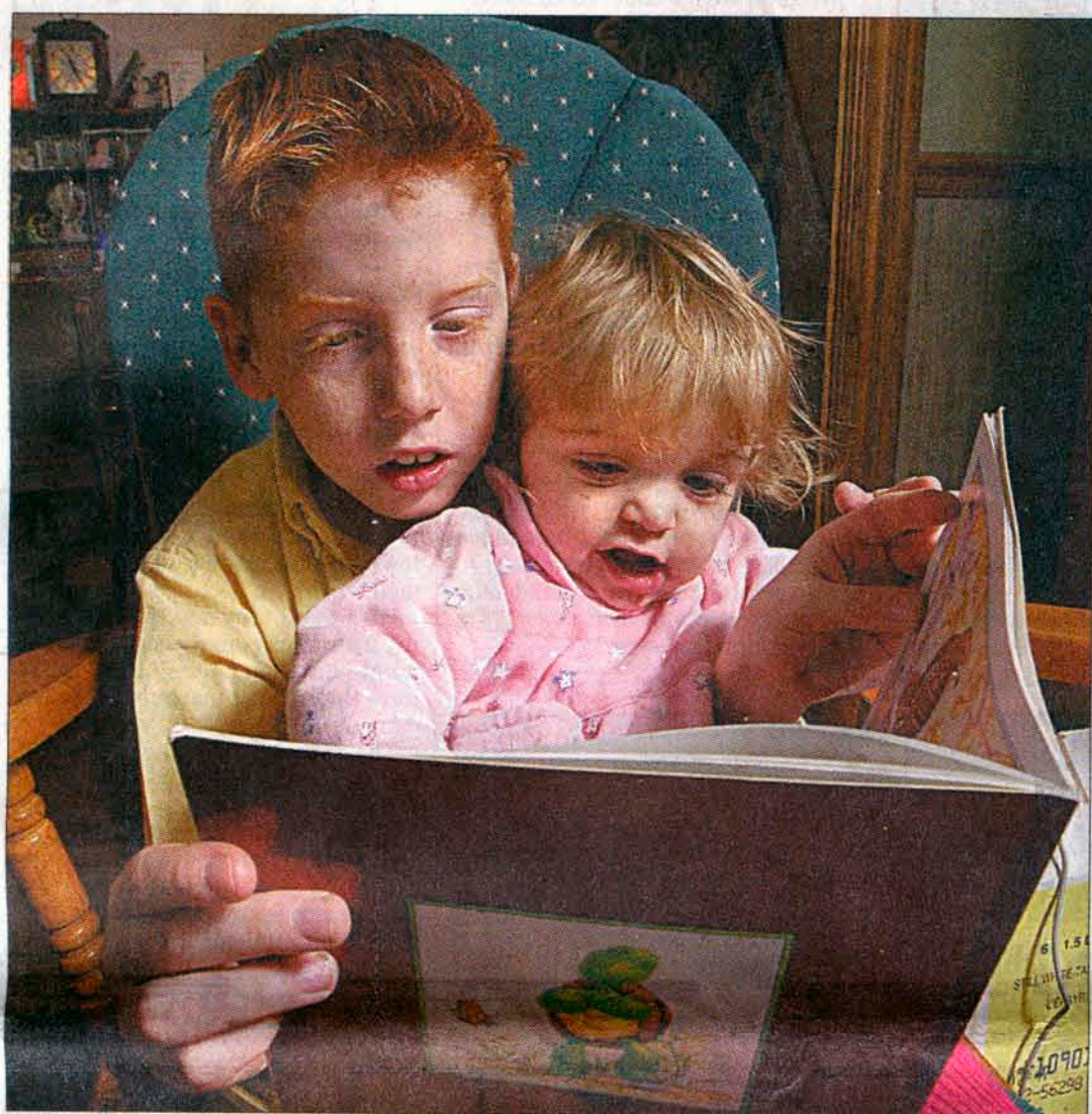


Dear Santa: Just make me better



GOOD HEALTH: Sean Carley, 10, reads to his little sister Emma Unis, 19 months. Sean wrote a letter to Santa telling him not to bring toys but rather good health for his sister and himself.

Star photo: Dan Janisse

Community touched by boy's wish

BY AMANDA GALBRAITH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"Dear Santa, I don't really need any toys this year, so if you can make me better, you can give more toys to other kids who don't have a lot."

Not your typical Christmas wish, but then Sean Carley isn't your typical 10-year-old.

A rambunctious boy with carrot-coloured hair and sombre eyes, Sean is plagued with seizures, nausea, nosebleeds and wears diapers because he is unable to control his bowels.

Sean has tuberous sclerosis (TS), an obscure genetic disease that causes benign tumours to grow on various organs in the body. His 19-month-old sister Emma, suffers from cerebral palsy and a heart condition.

It was with all this weighing on his frail shoulders that Sean sat down to type the letter that would dramatically change his family's Christmas. Despite 8,900 other wish lists pouring in, Sean's was flagged by Lyle Drouillard, co-ordinator of the Santa letter writing program at Canada Post.

Touched by the heartfelt emotion in Sean's letter, Drouillard sent it to his fellow employees in hopes of collecting enough money to purchase a gift for the family.

But the tale of a sick little boy who would give his toys away to needy children so "someone else could have fun" inspired the Canada Post employees who teamed up with the Windsor firefighters and Legion Branch 143 to launch a fundraising frenzy.

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Sick boy's wish

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"It was fantastic," says Drouillard. "It was unbelievable how fast the money came in. My phone wouldn't stop ringing."

Instead of a present each, the children received dozens of toys through Sparky's Toy Drive. Instead of a few dollars left over, the donors were able to present cheques to the family totalling \$1,565. On Dec. 22 Santa, Mrs. Claus and Sparky came to deliver the gifts, arriving at the Unis's Forest Glade home riding on an antique fire truck.

"It attracted a lot of attention," said Sean's mother Marie Unis, who says all her neighbours came over to see what the fuss was about. "I don't know if I've ever seen the kids smile that much."

Once considered a problem child, Sean was moody, irritable, and was so unmanageable that he was kicked out of school.

"They had all kinds of labels for him, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), learning disabilities, behavioural problems," said Unis. "They gave him all these names because they didn't know."

It was only after years of struggle that they discovered Sean had TS and had developed a brain tumour.

SPAGHETTI DINNER

On Jan. 15, the Windsor firefighters' Hook and Ladder Club is hosting a spaghetti dinner to help offset the Unis' monthly medical costs. Those attending can make a donation of any amount; the event starts at 11 a.m., with live entertainment from noon to 9 p.m.

The tumour was blocking the flow of cerebral spinal fluid to parts of his brain, causing his mental and physical problems.

For the Unis family, this came as a double blow. They had just spent the past year-and-a-half struggling with the emotional, physical, and financial implications of Emma's medical condition.

Weighing only 18 pounds, Emma has already undergone two open-heart surgeries and has to be fed by a tube surgically implanted in her tiny stomach.

With two severely ill children and four others ranging from little Emma to a 17-year-old, Marie — who had returned to work as a registered nurse — was forced to quit her job to take care of her family while her husband Gary supports the large family on a single income.

"This has been a really, really rough year. It's just hard, I'm like 'enough already,'" says Marie quietly. "Either someone has a sense of humour or thinks we can handle a lot."

And, much like Emma and Sean's problems, the flow of assistance continues.

"I feel like the community has become our family," says Marie amid the lively post-holiday chaos.