

A Christmas Story  
By Frank Cunningham

Once upon a time, there lived in the southern coal fields of West Virginia a family, an out of work husband, a stretched to the limits wife, and six children. Through the wife's meager income and food assistance programs, the family was getting by day to day, but just barely. It's the Christmas season and the Christmas tree has been set up in the living room. But like most low or no income families, there's nothing under the tree.

The children are too young to understand what home economics means. Their wants and desires are met by their parents without having to understand things like checkbooks and bank balances. And their wants and hopes were simple. The two boys each wanted a toy truck and the four girls wanted Barbie dolls and doll clothes to play with. As simple as their requests were, there was little hope that they would be realized.

Agnes, a Christian neighbor, knew the plight and the many stories about this family. Too, she knew first hand the wishes the children had of what might appear under that barren Christmas tree on Christmas morning. And on her own accord, she met those wishes. On Christmas morning these six children found two toy trucks, four Barbie dolls and a hat box. In the hat box was most every kind of doll clothes any Barbie would die to wear. The clothes were special and they were unique because Agnes had hand-made each and every one of them.

This family and those children celebrated Christmas. To the children, it was a normal holiday with time spent playing with family, friends and with their trucks and dolls. To the parents, it was a holiday of special meaning. From out of nowhere, an angel in the form of a neighbor shared a little bit of themselves without asking, without acknowledgement and without any expectations.

Agnes thought that it was a single instance of helping one family in need. It was something that she knew to do. After all, she learned it from her family and her church. It was the Christian thing to do. What Agnes did not know is that her effort would be remembered. Over the past 27 years, somewhere around 100,000 children have encountered a Christmas sponsored by people just like Agnes. And over the past 21 years, somewhere around 25,000 children have encountered a Christmas sponsored by people in Aiken County just like Agnes.

In that original family, the next to the youngest girl was my wife, Mary. And she remembered. 27 years ago, in West Virginia, she started Secret Santa. And 21 years ago, she brought Secret Santa to this church. This is the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual Secret Santa program. And in Aiken County, there are a number of families here just like Mary's family. We give toys to children not because of the toy or its value. We give gifts to those we do not know because it's the act of giving. Just like the three wise men who gave gifts in celebration of the birth of the Christ child.

Agnes doesn't know it, but she's counting on you to help her out this year.