

## Bell Ringers

Bells can often be heard throughout the Christmas season: musical bells, sleigh bells, and, of course, the bell ringers standing outside many of our local stores.

Bell ringers stand outside many major retail stores, ringing bells to draw attention to the pots or buckets next to them. The bell ringers hope that as shoppers walk by, they will drop some money into the pot. The money raised goes to help people in need.

“We raise more money during the four weeks of bell ringing than we do the entire rest of the year,” explained Janet Washington, executive director of the local food bank. Bell ringers usually begin their fundraising the day after Thanksgiving on “Black Friday,” the busiest shopping day of the year. Their last day is Christmas Eve.

The people ringing the bells are usually volunteers, people who are willing to spend a few hours of their time ringing a bell outside a store to help an organization they support raise money. “I do this every year,” says bell ringer Glenda Watkins. “I get to see lots of people, and it’s a good way to support a good cause.”



This year the food bank will have pots and bell ringers at 15 stores in the area. “We try to pick stores in areas where there are the most people,” explained Ms. Washington, “but there’s some competition. We’re not the only group raising money this way.”

And not every store allows bell ringers. “We have to get permission from the store managers well in advance. We start scheduling our locations in January to be ready for the next holiday season. Usually only one organization can do their fundraising in front of each store, and the most popular stores go quickly.”

If you see a busy store without a bell ringer, it’s probably because the store owners do not allow the bell ringers to be there. “Some people are afraid it will make their customers uncomfortable or will interfere with something else at the store,” said Ms. Washington. “But I think the opposite is true. Most people are very supportive of the bell ringers, and sometimes bell ringers actually draw attention to the store as well as to the bucket.

“We have one family – two parents and three grade-school age kids – who volunteer to be

bell ringers every year. They sing Christmas carols the whole time, and they're really good. People will stop and listen to them; they draw a little crowd. That's great for us, because it increases the likelihood that people will donate, and it's great for the store where they are because if people stop there they are more likely to go inside."

Several of the bell ringers have come up with creative ways to get people's attention, and, as a result, to increase donations. "One older man brings his poodle dressed as a reindeer. They always get a lot of attention.

"Others may dress up like Santa, play Christmas music or hand out mini candy canes. We really appreciate the extra effort many of our bell ringers bring to the project."

The food bank is hoping to raise \$30,000 this year. "Last year we raised \$26,000, and that was a record," said Ms. Washington. "But we have more people to feed this year, so we're hoping to raise even more money this year."

Most people who donate by putting money into a pot give a small amount. "Usually people on their way into the store give paper money, \$1 and \$5 bills," explained bell ringer Glenda Watkins. "People on their way out give coins, probably the change they get from inside the store."

Sometimes, though, some more unique objects end up in the pot.

"We always end up with things like bus and game tokens. I've seen buttons and shopping lists. One time a guy accidentally dropped in his car keys," said Glenda. "The pots are locked so I had no way to get the keys out until we could get someone back at the food bank to come help."

Sometimes more valuable objects are left in the pot. Last year, the organization received two gold coins in one pot. Each coin was worth \$50. Three years ago they were given several Civil War era coins worth of total of over \$700.

"That was kind of amazing," said Ms. Washington. "Just seeing something so old, getting to actually hold it in my hand. It was a very nice donation"

About five years ago they received a gold tooth. "That was kind of gross," said Ms. Washington, "but it had some value so we appreciated it.

"The most valuable thing we've ever received was a diamond ring worth about \$8,000. That one really surprised us. We thought maybe someone had dropped the ring in the pot accidentally. We held on to that ring for two years waiting for someone to claim it or to hear about one missing. But no one claimed it. \$8,000 buys food for a lot of people. We were very happy that someone was apparently willing to help us so much."

The food bank isn't expecting gold coins or diamond rings this year, but they are hoping to have a successful season full of giving and the ringing of bells.