

Bell Ringers

Bells can often be heard during the Christmas season. There are musical bells. There are sleigh bells. And there are the bell ringers standing outside many of our local stores.

Bell ringers stand outside many stores. They ring bells to draw attention to the pots or buckets next to them. The bell ringers hope that shoppers will drop some money into the pot. The money goes to help people in need.

“We raise a lot of money during the four weeks of bell ringing. More than we earn during the entire rest of the year,” explained Janet Washington. Ms. Washington is the executive director of the local food bank. Bell ringers begin their fundraising the day after Thanksgiving. That day is the busiest shopping day of the year. It is called “Black Friday.” Their last day is Christmas Eve.

The people ringing the bells are usually volunteers. They are people who want to spend some time helping a group 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. “We try to pick stores in places 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 ahead of time. We start scheduling our locations in January. Only one group can do their fundraising in front of each store. The most popular stores go quickly.”

You may 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 their customers won’t like it. Or they think it will interfere with something else at the store,” said Ms. Washington. “But I think the opposite is true. Most people like the bell ringers. Sometimes bell ringers bring more shoppers in to the store.

“We have one family of volunteers with two parents and three kids. They are 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. We get more donations. It’s great for the store. More people stop there.”

Several of the bell ringers have creative ideas. They get more attention. As a result they bring

in more money. “One older man brings his poodle dressed as a reindeer. They always get a lot of attention.

“Others may dress up like Santa. Or they play Christmas music. Or they hand out candy canes. We like 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. That was a record,” said Ms. Washington. “But we have more people to feed this year. We’re hoping to raise even more money this year.”

Most people who donate give a small amount. “Usually people on their way into the store give paper money. They give \$1 and \$5 bills,” said bell ringer Glenda Watkins. “People on their way out of the store give coins. It’s probably the change they get from inside the store.”

Sometimes some more interesting 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. We had to wait until we could get someone at the food bank to come help.”

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

“That was kind of amazing,” said Ms. Washington. “Just seeing something so old. I got to hold them 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. It was worth about \$8,000. That one really surprised us. We thought maybe someone had dropped the ring in the pot accidentally. We saved that ring for two years. We thought someone would claim it. Or we thought we’d 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.