

Toy for Tots:

Post Office visited by ghost of Christmas presents

By Laura Kenyon
Assistant Editor

Bedford Falls had Mr. Potter, Whoville had the Grinch, Christmastown had the Bumble, and Connecticut nearly had the Post Office.

Seen by some as a logical and equitable act of political correctness, and by others as a shameful exploitation of children in the “War on Christmas,” the U.S. Postal Service two weeks ago expelled Toys for Tots boxes from any Post Office lobby in Connecticut.

Less than a week later, on the evening of November 29, that decision was reversed.

“There are two things you shouldn’t screw with at the holiday time. One is kids” said John Dirzius, American Postal Workers Union president for the greater Connecticut area, especially those not fortunate enough to expect presents on Christmas. “The other thing is, we’ve got a war on. How can you go against the Marine Corps?”

The U.S. Marine Corps Reserve has sponsored the annual campaign to provide needy children with toys for the last 60 years. In 2006 — the most successful campaign ever, according to press materials — it gave 19.2 million toys to 7.6 million needy children throughout the country.

Participating in the program for the last 15 years, Mr. Dirzius said Connecticut Post Offices collect between 30,000 and 50,000 toys each year.

Although collection boxes are set up at stores and other locations in every state, New Canaan Postmaster Doug Carey said Post Office foot traffic increases “tenfold if not more” during the holiday season.

But this year, one day before the boxes were set to go up, Mr. Dirzius said he received notice that a “legal opinion” had been rendered against lobby solicitation, and the Toys for Tots boxes were banned.

According to Postal Service spokesperson Maureen Marion, only about 80 of the nearly 300 Post Offices in the state had planned to participate in the campaign to begin with. By federal law, she said, solicitation was always prohibited on Post Office grounds. “However, it was not enforced evenly on this particular point.”

“It has always been the Post Office policy to not have solicitations for charitable organizations in the lobbies,” Mr. Carey told the *Advertiser* on November 29, before the ban was lifted.

New Canaan is not one of the 150 locations represented by the American Postal Workers Union.

“We never had it in our lobbies,” he said, corrected later by a 20-plus-year employee who said Toys for Tots were collected in the location for “a couple years.” Mr. Carey has worked in New Canaan since 2001.

“It’s a nice thing to do,” he said. “Unfortunately it’s against the law”

Robert McCorkle, who has organized the Toys for Tots drive in the Ridgefield area for the last three years, said he’s “never had a Post Office as a collection point.”

Calling it “kind of silly,” he predicted the ban would have minimal or no impact on the 2007 toy drive.

He later added, however, “Toys for Tots is an official mission of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, and therefore I would think it’s a government activity.”

According to Ms. Marion, the decision stemmed from Postal Service regulation review. Officials realized that by restricting employees from fund-raising amongst each other but tolerating Toys for Tots boxes, “one side was too strict and one side was too loose.”

“It’s not a reflection on the Post Offices, or the Postmasters, or the union officials, or even the Toys for Tots program,” she said. “What it is is a step up of awareness of requirements to not accept solicitations of any kind.

“I can’t have Girl Scouts selling cookies. I can’t have cheerleaders advertising for a car wash. I can’t have veterans selling poppies.”

The decision was “so fair,” in Ms. Marion’s words, “that it looks like we’re being unfair.”

To Mr. Dirzius, however, who was unsure why a legal opin-

ion had been sought in the first place, the ban resulted from a “fearful” and “politically correct society.” He encouraged supporters to write or call Postal Service leaders.

“Let’s not make this Potterville,” he told the *Advertiser*, drawing a correlation between current U.S. Postmaster General John E. Potter and the villain of the Christmas classic “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

Whether due to pressure or protocol, the ban was repealed on November 29 for locations that had previously participated in the program — at least for this year.

“Let’s not make this Potterville.”

— John Dirzius, American Postal Workers Union

“The decision was made to leave it as is for one more year,” Ms. Marion told the *Advertiser* last week, “and after the first of the year, let’s bring everyone to the table who needs to be part of this decision and look at what we can do, what we need to do.”

When asked what led to the change of heart, she said, “Some of the folks that should have been part of the discussion were not present.”

Declining to comment on whether the campaign is safe for a few more weeks or a few

more years, Mr. Dirzius called the reversal “a real good decision for us.”

“We’re anticipating a good campaign,” he said, adding that he’s already seen “an increase in the giving level.”

Mr. McCorkle said he receives 10 to 20 voice mails and 20 to 40 e-mails daily about the program.

“For some reason there seems to be an increased level of interest in the drive this year,” he said.

As New Canaan had not been one of the previous participants, Mr. Carey said it will not change

its policy towards Toys for Tots boxes.

Collection bins can be found elsewhere around town, at locations including: Karl Chevrolet Hummer, 261 Elm Street; New Canaan YMCA, 564 South Avenue; Talbot’s, 80 Main Street; Webster Bank, 215 Elm Street; Wachovia Bank, 152 Main Street; First County Bank, 95 Park Street, and the *New Canaan Advertiser*, 40 Vitti Street.

More information about the program, as well as links for making online donations, can be found at toysfortots.org.

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