

A DRIVE FOR HOLIDAY HELP

pg. A3-12/19/20



CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

COLTS driver Jeff Howells, left, and his wife, Mary, stand near gifts purchased for needy families with donations from bus drivers and other COLTS employees at their Scranton home on Dec. 12.

COLTS driver Jeff Howells thought the transit system should give back. His coworkers took care of the rest

BY DAVID SINGLETON
STAFF WRITER

Jeff Howells came up with the idea, but the County of Lackawanna Transit System driver says the generosity of his coworkers made it happen.

Four families that rely on COLTS to get a parent or head of household to work will enjoy a merrier Christmas after Howells' fellow drivers and other employees chipped in \$2,500 this year to buy gifts for their children.

"Some of them have nothing, and we have decent jobs," said Howells, 55, Scranton, a COLTS driver for 18 years.



More than 30 COLTS employees — fixed-route and shared-ride drivers and members of the office staff — contributed to the effort, each giving at least \$5 a month for 10 months, How-

ells said. NET Credit Union kicked in \$500 in gift cards, and COLTS itself donated several 31-day bus passes.

Howells said the thought of employees helping COLTS passengers in need grew out

of incidents from Christmas past. During the holiday season in 2018, after a single mother who was one of Howells'

CHRISTOPHER DOLAN
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

of incidents from Christmas past.

During the holiday season in 2018, after a single mother who was one of Howells'

Please see COLTS, Page A8

COLTS: Hopes to do it all again next year

FROM PAGE A3
 Christmas gifts for her child stolen by porch pirates, Howells and his wife, Mary, bought presents to replace them. Last year, Howells said, a couple that uses COLTS lost

\$1,100 — money they planned to spend on rent and to buy Christmas gifts for their children — when the husband dropped his wallet on the bus. Howells said COLTS drivers donated \$1,100 to replace the cash and then he and wife also bought gifts for the children.

In making the effort a little more formal this year by asking his coworkers to commit to a monthly donation, he hoped to raise more money and help additional families.

“We see people every day that are struggling. They are paying their fares. They’re not asking for anything for free,” Howells said. “They are good, hardworking families that can’t afford a car and are just making ends meet.”

Beth Zangardi, who works in the Shared Ride Program office at COLTS, said employees were excited about participating in the project.

“It turned out to be a beautiful act of kindness,” she said. Because the drivers know the people who ride their buses, they were asked to recommend families, Howells said.

One recipient this year is a single mother with a teenage son from Blakely who loads her bicycle on the front of the



CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Christmas gifts on the Howells' dining room table at their Scranton home on Dec. 12.

bus to go to her job in Dickson City but then rides the bike home at night when she gets out of work, Howells said. She has been hit twice by cars.

Among the gifts her family is receiving is a new bicycle equipped with lights, he said. Gifts also have been purchased for six children who were taken in by an aunt and uncle after their mother — the aunt's sister — died earlier this year. Howells said it was likely the family would have been split up and the younger children placed in foster care if the couple hadn't stepped up.

Both the husband and the wife work in low-paying jobs and “have been riding the bus forever,” Howells said.

“These two people get on the bus every morning at 6 to go to work and they are not getting home until probably almost 6 o'clock at night,” he said. “We want to make it nice for them.”

Howells said Santa Claus will make a visit to some of the recipients' homes before Christmas to deliver a few gifts and the rest will be dropped off on Christmas Eve.

He plans to do it all over again next year. “To me, it's kind of like we need to pay it forward to the people we see every day,” Howells said.

Contact the writer:
 dsingletor@timestribune.com; 570-348-9132