

## 247: Behind the Red Kettle

*At Christmastime, the spirit of generosity shines brightest. But we know giving isn't just about what we give. It's about how we give. And that's why we're calling this series: Give With Joy.*

Today, we're pulling back the curtain on one of the most familiar sights and sounds of Christmas: the Red Kettle.

You've probably walked past one outside your grocery store or shopping center—the bell ringing, the volunteers bundled up in scarves and mittens, and that iconic kettle inviting you to pause for just a moment and give.



This year, for the 135th year, The Salvation Army's iconic Red Kettles will stand as a symbol of hope, generosity and community. Last year, in just 28 days, Americans gave nearly \$100 million at thousands of kettles nationwide. Every dollar stayed in the community where it was given. Together, those gifts helped The Salvation Army serve more than 27 million people all year long.

This tradition began in 1891, when Captain Joseph McFee set a simple pot at San Francisco's ferry landing with a sign that read, "*Keep the pot boiling.*" That small act of love has become a global invitation to joyful giving.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that "*God loves a cheerful giver.*" And that's what the kettle is all about—not just collecting change, but sparking joy. Joy in giving. Joy in serving. Joy in knowing that together we can make Christmas brighter for families in need.

Today, you'll hear from a longtime officer and volunteer about what kettles mean, why they still matter, and how every gift—no matter the size—changes lives.

So the next time you hear that familiar ring, I hope you'll think of what's happening behind the scenes—and the lives that are being changed because of it.

[Listen and subscribe to The Do Gooders Podcast now.](#) Below is a transcript of the episode, edited for readability. For more information on the people and ideas in the episode, see the links at the bottom of this post.

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To start, I want to bring in someone who has spent decades leading and championing kettles. Major Gwyn Jones has been involved since his first year in the U.S., back in 1989 as an employee in Boise, Idaho. Over the years, he's coined a term for people who take kettles seriously: "*Kettle-ologists*."

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**Major Gwyn Jones:** My first time I started doing this was in, what was it, Christmas, 1989, as an employee of The Salvation Army in Boise, Idaho, and I knew nothing of it. Because I was from England, I didn't know what the Red Kettle was. And then over the last 30-plus years, I would describe it as one of those cool slogans. I think National Headquarters came out with, "Change goes in, change comes out," sharing how that money we raise through the Kettle Program directly impacts every town we're in.

And I've always loved, as I've been stationed around the country, that I can tell people with a really truthful heart and an honest, encouraging heart, say to them, "Look, the money you put in our Red Kettle here in Concord, Santa Maria, Phoenix, wherever I've been, that money's going to be spent here to help people who are having challenges, whether with housing or food or clothes or whatever it might be, that money's going to be used here and it really will make a difference."

And when people give me a hard time about being the kettle guy, I say, "It's not because I love working 14-hour days. It's because I know the outcome," and I know that if I work hard and I can raise enough money, another corny slogan to come up with a number of years ago is, "no money, no mission." We can't do what we want to do. We can't serve the people we want to serve unless we raise funds.

And the Red Kettle is such a famous American iconic thing that I think it helps us in many ways, not just the money that goes in there, but people see it and they go, "Oh, yeah, Salvation Army, Christmas," and they might send us food, toys, money, whatever. But it reminds people what we are about. And I like to always share all those weird connections like Silver Bells and those songs that were written connected to Army, the Army's history, and be proud of that and be positive about it. Although Kettles are getting harder to do every year for many reasons, but I still think it's worth doing.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, I think so many people are familiar with seeing the Red kettles out at Christmastime, but of course, it's not as simple as just setting out a Red Kettle in front of a store. So when does Kettle season planning begin?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** August usually when we'll have some tentative contacts with stores. Maybe some of the stores might call me. The nice thing, because this is our eighth Christmas here in Concord, I now know lots of the managers or regional managers by name or they certainly know who The Major is. So it's fun that those connections, so it's much easier when I go into a store and say, "We start in two weeks. Don't forget." They're, "Oh yeah, yeah, no problem." Because those relationships have been built. But you've got to do that. And then preparing, make sure all your equipment's ready. And once again, it's easier here now in Christmas eight because we put everything away and stored it how I like to have it stored and stuff.

But it's certainly our preparation, just started doing paperwork. The Salvation Army, the last number of years has changed our Kettle programs numerous times just to make it exciting for us. And so we've had to learn new Kettle programs maybe and do that. And then also just last week we were at original headquarters for our Kettle Christmas fundraising day where all the offices came and we talked about what's happening this year and any changes. Preparing to hire people, [inaudible 00:03:19] around town who've been regular bell ringers for me. I'm always, "Hey, come on down, start working on your application," and stuff like that. So it really is a summertime thing. And then just going forward from there, just this week I finished getting my sheets ready, my counting sheets and my assignment sheets I have for putting people out on the routes and stuff.

So yeah, I just like to prepare extra early because things happen and the more you prepare, the more it takes away some of the stress. And it also, the more you are organized groups want to work with you. I've got one guy from a Rotary Club here in town, he called me a month, probably two months ago, about could they get their weekend at a certain store? Excuse me.

**Christin Thieme:** He was planning ahead, too. I like it.

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Yeah, he really likes it. He's an older fella, but he does run the Rotary Clubs and he calls me always like in May or June because he wants to get that place he wants to ring at and for his guys and girls from his Rotary Club. But then that's helpful to me. And if I'm organized and ready with my calendar, I can write them in for those couple of Saturdays, Sundays, whatever, and they can volunteer and ring a bell there. So I think organizing and planning is the biggest thing you've got to do because that takes, it's still stressful, but it takes some of that stress away. If you're last minute, then it won't be as successful. It just won't be.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, of course. Can you give us a picture of what Kettle season four, Concord specifically, where you're located, what does that look like? How many Kettles do you put out? How many people do you have involved?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** So we have, once again, through being here a while now, our volunteer base has gone up quite a lot. I still like to employ people because – excuse me, sorry. It's hard to cover spaces. We've got a total of like 31 spots. Most of the time, most days I may only cover 12 to 15 spots and then try on Saturdays, and then some volunteers on Sundays, too, to try to cover 30 plus spots. Because some of the spots might not be that good financially speaking, but then if I've got a volunteer there, then it's all profit. But yes, the average is only 14, 15 because the key I've found is it's not always the gross you're worried about, how much you raise. It's the net at what you keep.

So you can pay to cover 35 spots every day, but then you can lose money because you're paying so many people, and some of the spots make a hundred bucks. And in California, really now with the minimum wage, if you are not making over \$200 on a kettle, it's really not worth being there unless it's volunteer that goes there and does it for free.

**Christin Thieme:** Right. What do you see on average in a Kettle? Say somebody's out all day, what would you expect to see back from a Kettle?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Good spots might do 400, 450, 500 a day, but then a lot of the spots are more like 250, so it varies. But you have your really good spots. So I have my list every morning come in about just before 7, and I start filling out my list for that day. All the bell ringers, especially regular guys, have my phone number and they'll text me or ring me, "I'm going to be late today," or, "I'm not, can't come in today." Because working with a very volatile group of people, so some of them are pretty faithful, but even the really faithful ones will suddenly, "I'm definitely here tomorrow, mate," and they won't come in. So that planning again. But yeah, I'd say the average income is anywhere, probably \$250.

**Christin Thieme:** All that change, making change.

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Yeah.

**Christin Thieme:** So you start it in summertime and have a lot to coordinate before we actually get into the holiday season. Then we run up to those last few weeks. What did they look like before it's really go time?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** When we starting out this year, it's the 17th of November, so that's the week before Thanksgiving. So the good thing about that is the first week I've only got six or seven places I can ring at. So it's like a practice week with driving. We count the money every night and doing all those things, getting the bags for the coin and the cash and dropping it off at the night safe in the bank, in the night drop. So it's a nice practice week. And then getting those few bell ringers in, and then it's advertisement because people see them out there.

And then other bell ringers or folks, we put a big sign outside. People say to me, "Put that on Indeed." Most of the people we work with are going to ring bells aren't people that going to check on Indeed to be a bell ringer. They're going to be people that are random folks out and about. And so we have a big sign we put in front of the church, "Christmas jobs available" with a phone number, and then they'll phone and we get them in and start doing the process for hiring.

But yes, we start on the 17th, and then what that looks like is on the Friday before that is we take out stands to those seven or eight spots and we go in, I have a couple of guys, well one guy that helps me, I do, and we go out and go in, talk to the store manager, remind them, give them a business card, give my cell phone number and put the stand in little hiding spots somewhere at the door, the exit where you put it. And then that Monday, off we go. And then you start, and then that's it.

And then it just builds up as the weeks of more stores are allowing us to ring. And then once we come to December in this area, then we go from 15 spots to 32 spots or something. Sometimes I think you can be grumpy about doing this as a Salvation Army Officer, or if you're somebody that works at a corps that have been assigned to do carols, but if you're grumpy about it, it's not going to be good. It's not going to go well. So like I said, do I really love working all those hours? Not particularly. But if I try to be positive, and as I tell the bell ringers when they come in every morning and we have coffee and snacks and food for them, I say, "Do you want the grumpy major or the silly, wacky, sarcastic major?" And they always say, "We want the silly one." I said, "Okay." So I wear funny hats and I wear funny

ties and stuff just to keep the joy.

And then we've had, over the years, in different corps my wife and I have been in, we've had multiple bell ringers, come to the Lord, get involved in the church, in the corps, and become senior soldiers. And here, we've got four or five that come to church that have got quite involved through being bell ringers. And some of them rung bells long before we were here. Well, let's invite them to church. We always do that.

And then every morning I pray with all the bell ringers before they go. And then some of them have difficult situations. So sometimes we have some homeless guys might ring for us, help them get a good winter coat, maybe help them get a new sleeping bag, get them into some of our temporary winter shelters that are close by, drop them off at the shelter after we've helped them.

If guys come in and they're scary, and looking scary, smell and everything, real love is making a change. It's not just accepting that and saying, "Look, I love you. I want you to work for us, but you have to get a shower here. You have to clean up. You have to shave." And then I'll give them the equipment to do that and find places where they can do that. Real love, to me, is making a change in people's life, not enabling them to stay in that bad situation.

So that's where the ministry really comes in, where men and women really go in a different direction, in a positive direction and feel better about themselves. I call them fundraisers for The Salvation Army, not just bell ringers. And tell them what an impact they have. And then when they see people coming in to get food and toys and they help, I said, "You guys are helping pay for this," and reinforcing and making them feel good about what they're doing and that they really are making a difference, because they really are. And then making it positive like that.

And that's really where the ministry comes in. And in turn, if they know, as they say, Merry Christmas to folks, that some of those people they'll see during the day, that's the only person some of those folks will see. Some of those seniors that go home to a house alone, maybe a single mum that's going home to a house alone, they get a Merry Christmas, a smile, and how you doing? Nice to see you. All that's. So then, one of the things I always do, "Oh, that's a nice coat," or, "Oh, what a cool hat you're wearing," or something. Having those connections, making people smile, I think is an important ministry, too.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, it makes an interesting point about the smile. It's really serving as a touch point for the community and sharing joy and even the gospel as they stand there.

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Amen. Absolutely.

**Christin Thieme:** So how do you encourage them-

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Of course, when we pray with them every day they have, they'll have my business card. I encourage them, anybody that has real questions or deeper questions, give that out. Give out my office number to email me, connect with me, and then captain would come visit church. And over Christmas, we often have people that come by.

When I go out with my kids, we go out with our little Jones brass band, and maybe some other core members, guys come from the band. We go out and play. A lot of people will talk to us and we'll do requests and stuff. And then once again, as we play music and make kids smile and everything else, yeah, our primary purpose at Catalyst is to raise money, but importantly too, making people smile and realizing that we are a christian church and knowing what we're there for. I think those are important.

But yeah, I do encourage the bell ringers to do that. Say, "Merry Christmas. Christ is with us." Be willing to nail our colors to the mast and say, "Yeah, we're Christians and it's Christmas and we believe in Jesus and we love everybody. And anybody that comes to us, we help." And so I think that's all important.

**Christin Thieme:** It's so easy to give today. Go online and enter a donation. Why do you think kettles are irrelevant to physically put out in our communities? Why do we spend so much time doing that?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Because I think that there's still a lot of people that don't give online. Online giving is still relatively small compared to the cash donors. People say to me, "Oh, well..." I'll give an example. People say, "Oh, if you had a Visa thing to give," well, I've been to some appointments where we've had those, right? And then we have them in our pocket. And then people might say, "Oh, oh, well, I've given you money, but I've only got my credit card." Then they whip out the machine and go, "Right here, I got a machine." And they're like, "Oh, oh, well, I don't want to do it right now." So sometimes people use that as, I think it's an excuse not to give you money. Everybody has cash. We say, "Oh, cash is still king." That there's still a lot of people with money out there.

People that want to give to us will give us cash. And when they go into the store, people can get change and give us money. We still get a lot of cash. We netted, and I think last year, 189,000, I think cash, right? So that's a lot of money. We wouldn't have got that any other way. And then people also see that Salvation Army sign. They're reminded The Salvation Army is still in town.

Even when we're all across, we're one big county, right? When we ring in all ends of this county, we've got spots that are one hour's drive away. And when we drive an hour to get to a spot and do that, those people in that area out in the edges like San Ramon, which is quite a way from us, they're like, "Oh, Salvation Army's here." And then that, I think it provokes people to sometimes phone us, write to us, not just give financial help, but maybe ask, "Could you help my next door neighbor with this or that? Or do you have a recovery program?" Whatever.

So I think it's great advertising and I think it's hard to replace that. It's often hard. People say you can't really prove it, but I think it's proved, certainly my wife and I in our appointments are giving online, in the mail and in the kettles, it goes up.

And I think there's no other reason because people are seeing us out there doing, and then they'll say, "Oh, okay." And when I'm out there playing my trombone or playing my drums with a little band, people will say to me, "Oh, I'm going to write a check for you guys today." Or, "I'm going to go online and use a credit card and give you money." So I think it's just very important. It is. I know now it's just harder, but I think you've just got to do the best with what you've got. And even if you've only as a

course got four or five spots, do the best you can with those four or five spots.

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Kettles, as Major Jones reminds us, aren't just about dollars and cents. They're about ministry—about relationships, smiles, and joyful giving that ripples far beyond the kettle stand.

Hearing about all the preparation and the ministry behind the kettles reminds us that none of it would be possible without the people who actually stand by the kettle, ringing the bell and greeting every passerby.

For one family, that commitment has become more than just volunteering—it's a legacy.

The Fie family has been ringing bells for The Salvation Army for more than six decades. What started with Merrill and Dorie Fie back in 1956 has grown into a four-generation legacy of service, with children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren gathering every Christmas season to ring.

For the Fies, Christmas doesn't begin until the bell starts ringing.

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**Liz Stillwell:** In downtown Denver, there's a very popular shopping center and a tram goes down, up and down. So we take different stations on that mall. My grandpa always had the same location and we'd have a band come out and play. And so based on how we got divided up, it was usually my brother, Skip, and I and my mom on one kettle, and then my aunt and my two cousins on another. And it sort of grew from that. But as kids, we made it a competition.

**Christin Thieme:** Naturally.

**Liz Stillwell:** Naturally, as you do, because if you're five or six, you don't fully understand the depth of what you're doing. But I think my grandfather was such an extraordinary man that you could tell it was super important to him and you could tell that this was a big event and the amount of emphasis he put into, and not just this one event, but just generally telling us how important it was to give back to others.

So we didn't really get what we were doing, ringing our little kettle. But in doing so, we got to experience what he found so mesmerizing and rewarding, on top of our childhood things, which is like, "Who can get the most money?" By the way, none of us ever beat my grandfather, which was super disappointing. But I came close one year, I think my second year I got handed a 100 bill, which that was a long time ago.

So 100 dollars back then for a six, seven-year-old was a lot of money. And it is today, right? But that was a legendary moment that I had as a bell ringer. And then it sort of took its own shape for us. So we all got really inspired to kind of show up differently every year. So I played piano and trumpet and my brother did as well, so I brought a keyboard, my brother would bring his trumpet.

My younger siblings, the next group that came, they're 10 years younger, they also have their own things. So my sister would dance and we'd put music on and she'd start dancing. So as much as it was a competition, it was like we were really invested in earning the most money we could, and we really enjoyed the experience. Which I think people don't realize what that does to you, even as a child, how that feels, that even though you might not directly know what that 100 dollar bill or what that change goes towards, you know it's going to help people in need. So it's inspiring.

And I've had friends over the years who've joined, I've had classmates. My cousin Derek and I got organized a group during high school to go ring bells with us and it was bitter cold, absolutely negative temperatures, and we would get coffee and hot chocolate and then run out again. I couldn't tell you my first kettlebell experience, but I could tell you many, many, many of the highlights of just things that you remember and so could all of my cousins. I think it's unique to each bell ringer.

**Christin Thieme:** I think it's so fun that you guys have done this together for so many years and those stories that over the years collect and even though you couldn't beat your grandpa, you guys all gave it your best shot, which is great. From how you understand it, what originally inspired your grandparents to get involved and how did it grow into this big family tradition?

**Liz Stillwell:** My grandmother immigrated from Ukraine to Canada to the US, and she had met my grandfather and they moved out here and were starting a company and it was super important to them to get to meet the community, essentially. And so they started reaching out to groups, local groups, to see where they could meet people and get involved.

And one of the groups, I believe, they were called the Kiwanis, they had a kettlebell ringing event and my grandfather loved it. And that's literally how it started, that he found that... I think what was most important to him was that all of that hard work and all of the money that is being raised, as much of that dollar being raised goes towards the people that he was trying to help. And I think that's unique for The Salvation Army, that they have this edge that most organizations don't have.

We are good at doing the most good with what we have. And so from there, the Red Kettle Campaign is what he is known for. But over decades we did, in Denver, we have Pack a Backpack for kids to go back to school. There was a few years where we took the kids shopping for their school year. So we had \$125 and you did as much as you could with that money to help that kid have school clothes and shoes and socks and everything that they'd need.

So among the events that we've done, I would say the Red Kettle is just super heartwarming in a way, and it's something that mattered intensely to him and so much so that he brought out his grandfather's old cowbell.

If you look up any images of him, it's him with this big bell and he's just proudly ringing it. Speaking of my childhood memories, he had this kettle can and he would shake it, he'd make sure there was coins in it so people would know, that was part of his strategy. He'd shake it, "Help The Salvation Army," and he'd shake it so people would know and it would help others remember to pull out the change in their pocket and give to the kettles.

**Christin Thieme:** I love it. So what goes into the organization of the family now? Do you guys all go out on a specific day? Is it still a competition? Walk me through the plan.

**Liz Stillwell:** Always. I mean, it's a healthy competition. And now we have online kettles, so I split my time between Denver and LA. So even my LA group will donate and we all have our own communities, so it's great. We get to reach out to our own communities to help contribute to our kettle. My aunt is, bless her, she's the one that spearheads the Red Kettle campaign. So we're always the last Friday before Christmas and she takes all the ringers out for lunch and we get stationed in various spots and she divvies us up. And then we just do as much as we can with the location we have.

So it's both now where it used to be quite in person, that's all that there was, the world's changed and thankfully now we have QR codes or the online kettles that help people that might not have changed on them, but they can still send a few dollars that they can spare. And it's quite an event and we tend to go see a movie after. So it's all in good spirit, even though the competition's fierce, it's all in good spirit.

**Christin Thieme:** That's so funny. I love that you make it a whole event, a whole day of fun with the family. How do you explain to the younger members of the family now why this matters?

**Liz Stillwell:** I think that's a really good question. It makes me think back to what my grandfather said, which is that, "It's really important to give back to others and do what you can for others." So there wasn't one particular thing in doing this event that I would say was ever explained to us. And I don't think that even with my brother's kids or my cousin's kids, I don't know if that is the message. It's not being preached in that sense, that they're experiencing it in their own way. And so they have their own things that they can share.

So something that I can tell you that resonated so impactfully with me and it does every year, which is that we usually have somebody come up to us from on the street and explain, "Hey, I actually went through these programs, you guys saved my life. And we're just so grateful that this is something that you're continuing to help support."

And some that have been repeat for years would come back to the kettle. And others that were new, like, "My family had nothing. My family had no place to go, and I'm happy to give as much as I can back to this organization." So it's not something that I can could say was preached or explained as much as it was experienced.

And I would probably say the same thing. Yes, my grandfather's message was to give back, but it wasn't exclusively this one moment. It was more maybe an embodiment of a moment where it showed a lot of you look someone in the eye and shake their hand or say Merry Christmas, and you're engaging with that human in front of you. And that was very important to him. So in terms of how it's explained to the younger generation, it's that, but it's what they experience.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, absolutely. It's so interesting because almost anybody who stands at a kettle for any period of time will tell you a story like that, somebody who's come up to them and shared how

much they've been impacted by the organization and what it funds for the rest of the year. And it's really cool because you see that impact is so widespread and it's neat to be part of that. I know your grandpa once said, "If you don't give back, you're missing out on a dimension of life."

**Liz Stillwell:** I think we're in a bit of an epidemic of loneliness, and I think people forget where other people are in life and we're isolated again, we're on our phones, we're not part of our communities. And so if you remain in that zone of loneliness, you forget that there's your neighbor next door who's more than willing to help make dinner one night or help take the... We forget these things.

And so to what he had said, it's more about giving is as much a gift to yourself as it is to the person you're giving to and because you're engaging with a person. And that is a gift in itself to have that community. And even if it's the tiniest thing. For us, we bring candy canes and wish people Merry Christmas and just look them in the eye. I think even that tiny gesture of kindness and community that you're part of something is meaningful to people in a way that I think we forget sometimes or we're kind of becoming more wired to forget that we have this community.

So in terms of that dimension of life, yeah, absolutely.

So in terms of that dimension of life, yeah, absolutely. It's so fulfilling to have that been actually blessed that he found this in his youth and kind of perpetuated that tradition to us and on our hearts. We hope this continues for centuries, but also that it inspires other people to step up and get involved in their communities, whether it's bell ringing or making Thanksgiving meals or whatever it might be.

There's so many things and ways that they can participate. If it's not money, they can still actively engage. And I think that's that dimension of life that we all have something to give and it's important to give, whatever that might be.

**Christin Thieme:** And it can be fun. Like you said, you can find your own tradition of service that is enjoyable and makes it a fun family event. So we are a few weeks away from Christmas. Are you guys still signed up the Friday before Christmas? Is that your day this year? Are you going to be at the kettle and what are you most looking forward to this year?

**Liz Stillwell:** Yes. Yes, we are. We're hoping we get Cherry Creek, which is another area near us. We've always wanted to try to ring there and we'll have the little kiddos with us out in force and we will sorely miss my grandparents. This will be our first year without them, but it's our 70th year as a family and they're with us in spirit. So ultimately that's what matters.

**Christin Thieme:** 70th year, that's incredible. How many members of the family do you expect?

**Liz Stillwell:** All of them. I tend to fly back the day before, I wrap work and come back to Denver and I'm jet lagged or crazed, but we all make it to the kettles. So we tend to have eight stations. We're a large force and it's a big event and it's as much of a gesture to our family and the tradition and the dedication we have as much as it is to what The Salvation Army does for the community—

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The Fie family shows us the heart of kettle volunteers—how a legacy of giving is passed from one generation to the next. But what happens after the bell stops ringing and those gifts are counted?

To help us understand the impact of every dollar dropped in the kettle, I want to return to Major Gwyn Jones. Over decades of kettle ministry, he's seen firsthand how those funds transform not just Christmas, but lives all year long.

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**Christin Thieme:** When someone drops a dollar or change into a kettle, what happens next? Where does that money actually go?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Well, we count it every night and then we deposit at the bank at nighttime, and that goes into our bank account. And then that money is then directly used here in Contra Costa County to pay for all sorts of things, from whether it's buying food, buying turkeys, maybe sometimes if we run out of toys, buying some toys. Also goes towards paying salaries of those that work here, for serving people all year long.

So it's an important chunk of our budget every year, and it does affect... Because if we don't raise enough, I always get stressed and everybody makes fun of me 'cause I get so intense about it. But I say, this literally means if everybody... This sounds overly dramatic, but I'm just very always fiscally conservative and always want to be in the black. It literally means if everybody can keep their jobs the same, if we have to reduce hours of employees, if we can maybe do some of the other programs as much as we have before. During the summer, taking kids to camp, can we take the same amount of kids? All those. So it feeds into so many things.

And the big thing about Christmas kettle money is there's no strings attached. I can do anything that The Salvation Army does here in Concord and across the county, I can use that money. If we use a new freezer... We've got two food pantries. If one of our freezers breaks, I might be able to use some of that kettle money to buy a new freezer in one of our food pantries. So it really helps with so many things. So it makes...

And I don't know any other way I'm going to raise \$180,000. People say, "Oh, you can get grants," and blah-blah-blah, but it's just not that straightforward. We've only got four employees here, and my wife and I. And we serve anywhere from 40 to 60 families a day in the food pantry, we've got these 18 guys in our transitional living. We run another food pantry about an hour away in the Richmond area. To do all those things, I don't know where we'd find that money.

**Christin Thieme:** Like you said, that money stays locally so that you can offer the services that your community needs, which is a really important part of the kettle too. Is there a story or example you could share kind of down the line, of money given directly impacted somebody's life?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Well yeah, I think just if we look at the guys in our transitional living. They pay a program service fee, but to run those nine apartments with two guys in each apartment, whether it's fixing the sewer line one day or getting them a new washer-dryer, we bought a new washer-dryer for

one of the apartments the other day. Those guys in there, their lives transformed. We've got multiple guys who've come through in the last seven years with us who came from literally being on the streets, going through a Salvation Army ARC program in Oakland, coming to us, staying with us for two or three years. Then transitioning out back into the community, getting their own apartment, sticking with a job.

Right now we've got a guy who just moved on. He lives in a place called Burlingame, which is just by the San Francisco International Airport. He works at a major hotel there, he's the executive chef, he has a massive staff. And he's been doing that in a few other hotels while he's been with us, but he's been getting to that point where he could do it all. He could pay for his truck, he could pay his bills, he could save money, get his own apartment. He's engaged to a lovely young lady and is in a really positive place. But without our transitional living program, he wouldn't be there. It's as simple as that, I mean, he wouldn't be there.

And we've got multiple guys with similar stories to that who stay with us two or three years and then they get into a... I just started doing marriage counseling for a couple Sunday, and Brandon's been with us four years. And in the new year he's going to get married. And The Salvation Army and the ministry here has been a massive part of that.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, absolutely. And I'm sure you could spend all day going through stories just like that. What do you wish every donor could see about the difference their giving makes?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Yeah, I wish... I mean, I send out handwritten thank you cards to people that give us any checks over \$100. And people I meet, I might write to them or talk to them or even call them sometimes. And I wish every one of them could physically come to our building during the busiest times of the food pantry and see that, come to our building when we're doing our, say, Tuesday night Bible study with the guys or Sunday morning early house meeting with those guys, as they share the transformation that Jesus, through The Salvation Army, has made in their lives.

And at Christmas when we have... Sometimes some of the folks, we do a drive-through to pick up the toys at Christmas. And we'll have... Last year we had a lady... Well it happens all the time, but she's crying her eyes out, saying, "I had no idea I was going to get all this wonderful toys and food. And this is so amazing, 'cause..." Very genuinely thankful for that difference that The Salvation Army has made.

So if there'll be a way for all those donors, and non-donors who don't know what we do at all often, could see some of those things, it would transform, I think, to how many people would support us, honestly, when they saw those real people being really helped in really practical ways.

**Christin Thieme:** If you could leave people with an encouragement about giving at the kettle this year, even for those who say, "Well does my small gift, does this change really matter?" What would you say?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** I'd say every dollar helps, literally. Because as we get... Many of our kettle sites, for example, aren't always in affluent areas. But if we get 300 \$1 bills in that kettle from 300 different people, well all of them have been a part of that big difference that one kettle made.

And then also the other thing I should mention, I haven't mentioned yet, it creates employment opportunities for, sometimes, people that can't always get a job or they want an extra job. I hire many people that have a regular job, and then they work for me on their day off. So that's another ministry, we're creating a job for somebody else to waste some money for their personal needs for their family.

So I think even if it's just a quarter that goes in, and as I see parents are giving money to their kids to give in, teaching them to be donors and supporters of what we do. And I think us as Salvation Army officers and members and volunteers, we need to be proud about what we do. Sometimes we seem to forget to be proud. I don't mean in an arrogant way, I just mean thankful to God that we get to do these things and really can make a difference in our communities, even when it's pretty hard and stressful sometimes, that we're still making a difference.

**Christin Thieme:** Yes, definitely. I like to often ask people as a last question on this show, what is giving you hope lately?

**Major Gwyn Jones:** Oh gosh, that's a big question. Well, seeing that people want to still support us and want to help. I'm involved in the Rotary Club here in town, in Concord, and they're always very encouraging and they give me hope. I came to this meeting today straight from a pastor's meeting, we meet every Wednesday morning, and here my fellow pastors around the county sharing good, positive stories about stuff where Jesus is having an impact around where we are.

So that gives me hope, that I see other people in ministry, sharing other people that are in ministry who want to support The Salvation Army. Other people that aren't even Christians, that see that we're doing good things and want to be a part of that change in their community and supporting it.

And I think once people see what we do, when you see people giving bags of toys to families that are maybe pretty low income, it's pretty hard not to be hopeful. Even though there are some very serious challenges, financially and practically, to The Salvation Army these days, if we as officers can present a hopeful attitude and a positive attitude and joy I think it can make a difference. So I'm always hopeful, otherwise I probably would've left this ministry a long time ago. If it had been a regular job, I'm sure I would've left. But it's much more than that.

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Today, we've gone behind the red kettle.

We've heard from Major Gwyn Jones about the ministry and preparation that make kettles more than just fundraising—they're a place of connection, smiles, and joyful giving. We've heard from the Fie family, whose legacy of ringing the bell has spanned four generations, reminding us that service can become a tradition as meaningful as any other at Christmas. And we returned to Major Jones to see the impact—that every coin, dollar, and digital tap adds up to meals served, families sheltered, and

hope restored all year long.

The kettle isn't just a red bucket. It's a symbol of hope, generosity and transformation.

So here's my invitation to you this Christmas season:

Sign up for a shift at [registertoring.com](https://registertoring.com). Bring your kids, your coworkers or your friends, and share the joy of ringing the bell.

Or, when you pass a kettle this year, pause for just a moment. Drop in a gift, tap to give, or scan the code. Know that your generosity stays in your community, helping your neighbors in need.

Because behind every ring of the bell is a ripple of joy. A joy that changes Christmas—not just for those who receive, but for those who give.

**Additional resources:**

- [Join us in giving joy](#) to families who are experiencing poverty, hunger, job loss and more. Your generosity offers joyful reassurance that even during our most challenging times, we are not alone.
- [Say “yes” to a simple, meaningful Advent](#). A daily Scripture, short reflection or activity (kid-friendly!) and prayer prompt—no pressure, just a joyful rhythm your whole family can share in the free Caring Advent Paper Chain.
- If you are enjoying this show and want to support it, [leave a rating and review wherever you listen](#) to help new listeners hit play for the first time with more confidence.

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