

Small town reveals big heart through Project Christmas

By Lee Strong

Christmas 1982 presented Father Joseph McCaffrey with two problems.

St. Mary's in Dansville, where Father McCaffrey was assisting part time, had developed a Christmas tradition of distributing gifts to needy families in the area. The gifts were being distributed in the parish school to the children of these families. The problem with this method was that children who didn't receive gifts couldn't understand why, and fights frequently resulted.

The second problem was that a number of other church and community groups were also distributing gifts. As a result, some families were receiving gifts from two or more of the groups, while others were receiving nothing at all. Some of the families who received gifts were getting inappropriate presents as well — two packages of toys when they needed food, for example.

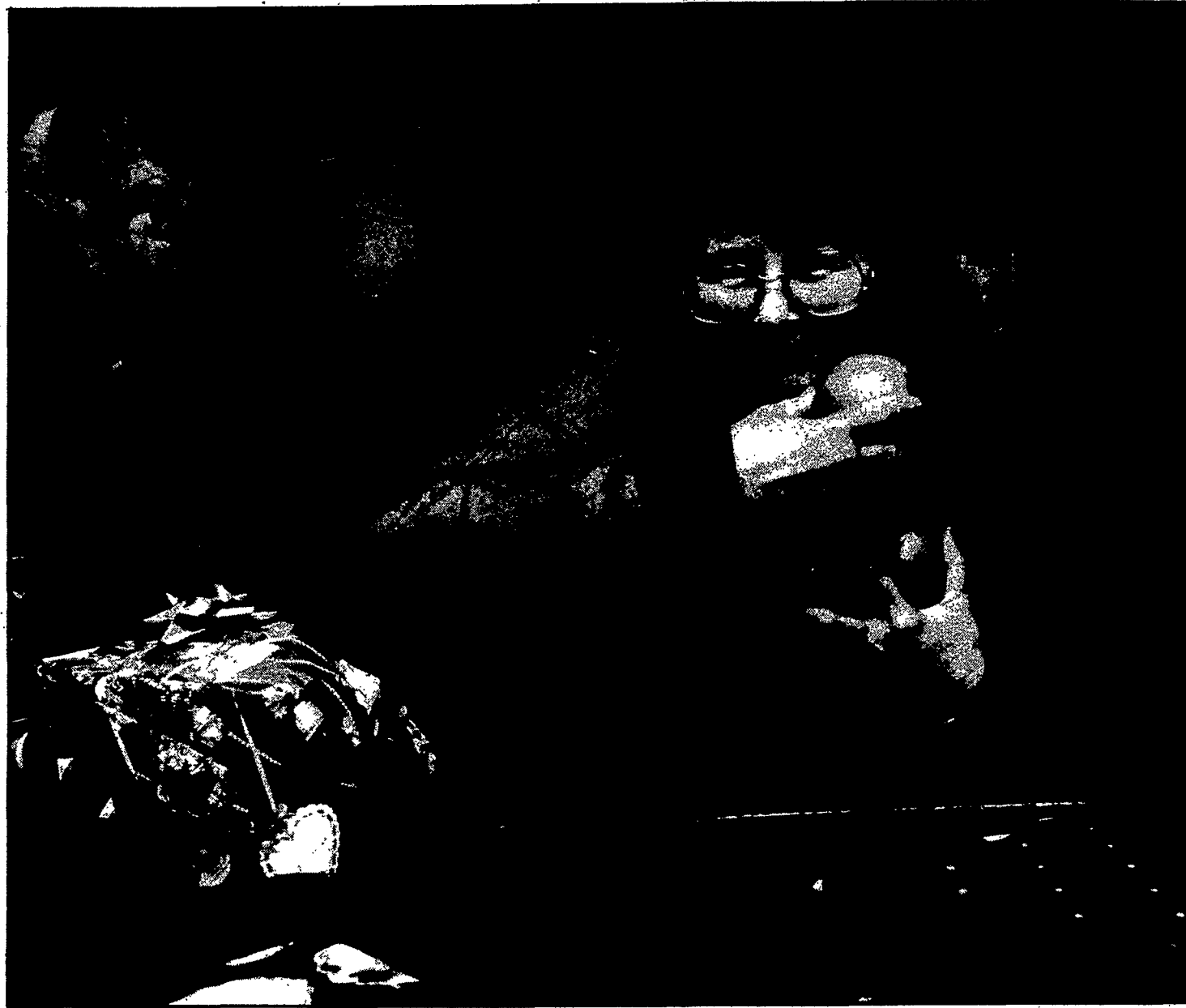
Father McCaffrey's solution was Project Christmas.

Today, Project Christmas is a community-wide program coordinating the distribution of more than 200 Christmas baskets in the Dansville area. Currently directed by the Rev. Jim Bender, pastor of the Dansville Presbyterian Church, the project involves a number of church and civic groups.

"It's kind of an exciting program to be part of," the Rev. Bender said. "It really works, and it's wonderful to see the diverse groups working together."

The project today follows the pattern developed by Father McCaffrey five years ago. In November, ads are placed in the local Pennysaver, asking for the names of people who might need help at Christmas. A project steering committee consisting of church, social service and civic leaders compiles a master list, then distributes the cases among the groups participating in the project. The committee also solicits turkeys and hams for the food baskets from local grocery stores.

The centralized coordination the committee provides has eliminated a lot of needless duplication, the Rev. Bender noted. Coordination



Nicole Sanderson puts oranges into boxes for needy families in Livingston County. St. Mary's parish of Dansville distributed 47 food baskets as part of Project Christmas.

Michael Neckett Aydogan

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Sandy (left) and Sherry Johantgen sort food donations for Christmas baskets to be delivered by waiting volunteers.

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