

GREATER TORONTO

'Supermarket model' gives food bank dignity

Clients like choosing own items from shelves

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STAFF REPORTER

When reborn a Good Samaritan on Christmas Day, Ebenezer Scrooge expresses his new-found generosity by donating food in the form of a massive turkey twice the size of Tinsy Tim, purchased and delivered to his poverty-stricken clerk.

Today, such donations are the daily work of Ella Maxwell, manager at the North York Harvest Food Bank, a *Toronto Star* Santa Claus Fund partner. Maxwell is part of a team that helps 150,000 people a year.

Demand remains record high, said Maxwell, a reality of the ongoing recession. According to a 2011 survey, the majority of her clients, most with families, have been using food banks for six months or less and the reason they're coming is most likely because they lost their job.

Some children, said Maxwell, look forward to Christmas only because of the Santa Claus Fund. The present will be the only one they get.

As for the parents, said Maxwell, "they're happy it's not only candy or toys, but warm winter stuff as well." (Included in the *Star's* gift box are hats, mittens and sweaters).

Her clients' stories can be severe. One family with a 5-month-old baby was in Canada less than a year before being swindled out of their money — \$8,000 — by a lawyer. The husband wasn't getting enough hours at work and there wasn't enough food for the baby.

When distressed families come through the door, said Maxwell, "you try to calm them down." Soon, "they see that someone is there to help."

For 10 years, the food bank has been located in what used to be a rather bleak high school industrial workshop. But that changed when Maxwell, a 34-year-old native of Saint Lucia who wears her nails



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long and painted black with silver glitter, took over last spring. She redesigned the space as a welcoming one, painting the walls a cheerful yellow and installing a snack and coffee station.

More importantly, Maxwell overhauled how the food was distributed. Instead of giving clients a general box of food, they now choose items from shelves.

The supermarket model, as she calls it, emphasizes client dignity. "A lot of people were pleasantly surprised," she said.

Volunteers like it too. Ted Ledrew, a volunteer of two years with a bushy white beard, was working in the stockroom late on a weekday. "I'm here seven days a week, eight hours a day, and I'm hooked."

Helping out, said Maxwell, is rewarding — something old Scrooge figured out not a second too late. "Here's the turkey," he said upon seeing his soon-to-be delivered bird. "Hallo! Whoop! How are you! Merry Christmas!"

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