

“The Gift”
A Community Production of Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol”
Directed by **Mike Elkins**

Back in 1986, NDNU Drama Professor Mike Elkins had a simple idea for bringing the spirit of charitable giving alive. For the upcoming Christmas season, he wanted to bring a gift of top-quality musical entertainment to the Bay Area. He envisioned free admission, so that anyone who wanted could attend. Those willing or able would be encouraged to bring canned food or new toys that would be distributed to people in need. What better theme for such a project than Ebenezer Scrooge’s story of redemption as told by Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol?”

Notre Dame de Namur University granted Mr. Elkins free use of their theatre, but other than that, he was on his own. He still needed sets, costumes, music, money for royalties, among many other things. He could pay neither actors nor staff, nor could he even assure that there would be an audience. Undaunted, Mr. Elkins got to work. He assembled an outstanding group of actors, musicians, tailors, crew members, business owners, and community members of all ages -- all willing to donate their time -- because, apparently, Mr. Elkins’ enthusiasm was contagious.

The first year, there were 4 performances in half-full houses and a few hundred items of food and toys were collected and donated. The volunteers dubbed themselves “The Performance Group,” and the tradition began. In keeping with the theme, the name of the production was simply, “The Gift.” The following year, word spread that there was free top-flight seasonal entertainment on the peninsula. Local professionals came to volunteer to act, direct, choreograph and donate lighting, among other things, and the audiences grew exponentially.

In recent years, “The Performance Group” numbers 130 actors and crew from all over the peninsula ranging from grade-schoolers to octogenarians. Each year, there are new volunteers as well as many who return. Some have been involved from childhood to adulthood. “The Performance Group” has included grandparents, parents, children and everything in between -- **who all donate their time in hundred-hour increments**. Over the years, **Mr. Elkins has volunteered well over 12,000 hours** to coordinate volunteers, direct, act, choreograph, and oversee the over-all quality of the event.

The ritual of collecting presents under the Christmas tree in the theatre lobby is a cherished custom. Each successive night more donations are assembled until the entire lobby is packed with cans of food and toys piled to eye-level, leaving little room for walking.

Each year, the giving ritual culminates the morning after closing night. The cast and crew gather in the lobby of the theatre and greet the staff of truck drivers arriving from many Bay Area charitable organizations to collect and distribute the donated items. All

toys go to the “Toys for Tots” program administered through the Belmont-San Carlos Fire Department, and the food is distributed where needed most, which over the years has included Second Harvest Food Bank, Samaritan House, Padua Dining Room and many more.

“The Gift” has now expanded to 9 performances, all nearly sold-out. **Since 1986, it has been seen by over 100,000 people who have donated well over 48 tons of food and over 20,000 toys. Recently, “The Gift” donates over 3 tons of food per year.**

Over the years, Mr. Elkins has been approached by many parents thanking him for providing a tangible example of charity accessible to the minds and imaginations of children. “The Gift” has introduced an entire generation of children to the concept of giving.

Each season, members of The Performance Group go out into the community to perform abbreviated versions of “The Gift” to the elderly and inner city children, among others.

Mr. Elkins has received hundreds of letters of gratitude from individuals, non-profits, corporations, and civic organizations and many encomiums from city, county, State, and Federal government representatives. Please see the attached list.

Mr. Elkins has worked hard to keep “The Gift” a local grass-roots community volunteer event. Several commercial and non-profit organizations have offered him money to be officially affiliated with the performance. Although he gratefully accepts donations and gives ample acknowledgement, he resists further outside influence. Mr. Elkins holds true to his original very simple idea. “This is a gift from the community to the community,” he says. “It’s a tough job, but somebody’s got to do it. The community needs it.”

2010 will mark the 25th Anniversary of Mike Elkins’ “The Gift.” It is fitting that the Silicon Valley Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals should honor him on Philanthropy Day because his expansive vision of merging story-telling with charitable giving epitomizes the spirit that makes Silicon Valley such a vibrant place.