

2008 YEAR
IN REVIEW

Bellmore HERALD

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DECEMBER 25 - 31, 2008

75 Cents

PERSON OF THE YEAR '08

TOM O'CONNOR

Dedicated to the children
of Hurricane Katrina

By NANCY HILER

Many people go the extra mile to help others. Tom O'Connor of Bellmore goes the extra 1,300 miles. The retired New York City fire lieutenant founded and spearheads the Katrina Kids Christmas program, an annual mission of mercy for children on the Gulf Coast who are still affected by Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the region in 2005.

After the storm struck, O'Connor organized a hurricane relief operation, arranging for a group of fellow retired and active city firefighters from Bellmore, Merrick and surrounding communities to bring truckloads of provisions to southern Mississippi that October and November. O'Connor's concern for the youngest people affected by the tragedy, however, prompted him to return with toys that Christmas – and every Christmas since then.

"They are so poverty-stricken," he said. "The kids we're giving toys to don't have shoes on their feet. They tell us they wouldn't have Christmas without us."

Jim Leonard of North Merrick, a retired city fire lieutenant and O'Connor's friend since childhood, said, "If it weren't for Tom, it wouldn't get done. It doesn't happen without him. We just go along for the ride."

Retired fire Lt. Kirk Lester said, "He's completely selfless. He never uses the word 'I.' He always talks about 'we.' He refuses to take credit for getting everything done."

For his compassion, service and ongoing commitment in bringing Christmas joy to the youngest victims of Hurricane Katrina, the Herald is proud to name Tom O'Connor its 2008 Person of the Year.

His toy drop has evolved over the past three years, becoming a full-time logistical

individual donations of toys and the funding needed for transportation and other aspects of the trip. And he communicates and makes arrangements with the people and organizations serving those in need on the Gulf Coast.

"It all gets done because when Tommy says this is the right thing to do, we just kind of do it, no questions asked," Lester said. "When he was senior man at the fire-

his judgment."

"Tom just wants to make the kids happy and be on his merry way," said Leonard. "He takes care of all the headaches, and he hates to take credit for anything."

Most of the firefighters involved in the toy drop were on active duty during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, most with Engine 53, Truck 43 in Harlem. Having received support and assistance from people across the country at the time as they dealt with the devastation, O'Connor said that he and his buddies saw the toy drops as their way of giving back to others in need.

The scale of the effort has grown. This year, close to 30 firefighters left New York early Tuesday morning, Dec. 9, and drove a caravan of eight 24-foot trucks with 12,000 toys and other goodies to the Gulf Coast. On Friday and Saturday, Dec. 13 and 14,

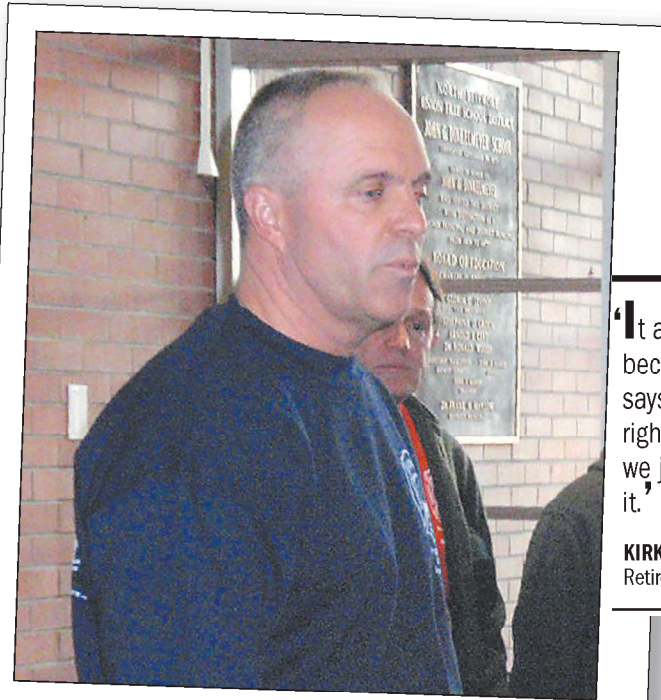
they worked 12-hour shifts to distribute the toys to children at five community centers in Jackson, Harrison and Hancock counties in Mississippi, and at Bayou La Batre in Mobile County, Alabama.

"This was the hardest year," O'Connor explained – not only in light of the reeling economy and reduced corporate donations, but also because fundraising

was needed for disasters fresher in people's minds, including the wildfires in California and Hurricane Ike in Galveston, Texas, in September.

"This is our little piece of pie," O'Connor said, quick to thank the many other individuals and companies that support the toy drops, including Penske Truck Rentals, Matty's Toy Stop, Mattel, Books for Kids, Avon Products and WinStuff/GoodStuff.

Comments about this story? NHiler@liherald.com or (516) 569-4000 ext. 234.



Nancy Hiler/Herald

Tom O'Connor

effort. He works nonstop to promote the cause. He coordinates with the Stephen Siller/FDNY Let Us Do Good Children's Foundation to arrange for corporate and

house, we lovingly called him Cardinal O'Connor. He instinctively knows the right thing to do. He teaches others the right thing to do by example. People just trust

"It all gets done because Tommy says this is the right thing to do, we just kind of do it."

KIRK LESTER
Retired firefighter

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