

FOR SOME, PAYING FOOD AND RENT LEAVES LITTLE FOR PRESENTS

Working poor struggle at Christmas

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

There probably isn't a soul out there — the filthy rich excluded — who doesn't feel financially stressed at Christmas.

The trimmings and trappings of the season can take their toll even on those who consider themselves fiscally secure.

Imagine what it's like for a family already struggling to make ends meet.

Jane Nielsen, family services director for the Salvation Army, said more two-income families are turning to the church for a food hamper and gifts for their children this Christmas.

"We're seeing a lot of working poor," Nielsen said.

Even this year, shelters are saying — and a study on homelessness in York found — that 51 per cent of families in shelters have two incomes.

Nielsen said rents in the region eat a big chunk out of many families' paycheques, often leaving little for necessities such as food and clothing, let alone Christmas.

"It's expensive to put on a Christmas. Years ago, turkey was fairly inexpensive. Now, the cheapest turkey for a family of five or six runs around \$40."

The Salvation Army gives the families it helps \$40 in food vouchers. And thanks to the overwhelming generosity of the community in the last week, it is budgeting \$100 in presents per child aged up to 15 for a big and small gift and stocking stuffers.

For families not turning to an agency for help, how much does some Christmas cheer cost? Not a lavish spread but a decent Christmas with some of the trimmings that would do a family proud.

Meet our fictitious family: mom, dad, a 14-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter.

Our family went shopping only days before Christmas to take advantage of the last-minute sales.

The first purchase was a tree, \$25 for a six-foot scotch pine.

The parents agree to spend no more than \$100 before taxes on each child and another \$20 each for stocking stuffers.

For their teenage son, mom and dad buy a White Westinghouse portable stereo for \$69.97, reduced from \$89.99. The boy also will receive an \$18.99 hockey stick, bringing the total, with tax, to \$102.30. With stocking stuffers, the total rises to \$122.30.

The girl will get figure skates (\$32.97), an Easy Bake Oven (\$24.97) and a Poo-Chi dog (\$32.97)



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Cashier Jill Cowal has seen a lot of shocked expressions from shoppers when the total is tallied up. The Salvation Army reports more two-income families in York Region are turning to the church for a food hamper and gifts this Christmas.

under the tree. Her gifts cost \$104.54, with tax, totalling, with stocking stuffers, \$124.54.

The children were limited to \$20 before tax to buy each parent a present. And the husband and wife could give each other a present costing no more than \$30.

Dad will receive a \$19.99 tool box from his son and \$19.99 watch from his daughter. His wife will present hubby with a bottle of Pierre Cardin aftershave lotion for \$27.99. The father's total after tax comes \$78.16.

Mom will receive a small gift hamper with raspberry tea, flavoured coffee, cookies and apple cider from her daughter, on sale for \$16.97, down from \$19.97. Her son

bought a Proctor Silex coffee maker for \$18.97. Her husband purchased Gloria Vanderbilt pyjamas on sale for \$24.49, down from \$34.99. The mother's total after tax comes to \$69.49. The bill for presents for the entire family comes to \$394.49.

The family then spends \$3.97 on wrapping paper, 67 cents on a bag of 27 bows and \$1.29 on tape. Now they're off to the grocery store.

An 11-pound turkey costs \$22.76. Two boxes of stuffing on special ring in at \$2.58. A can of cranberry sauce is \$1.89. Five pounds of potatoes sell for \$3.49.

Next, come the veggies. A bag of carrots is 99 cents. Frozen corn and peas each cost \$1.77.

Two cartons of egg nog are \$2.78. A crate of clementine oranges costs \$4.99. Pumpkin pie is \$2.49, while an apple pie on special is \$4.99. A two-litre bottle of pop on sale is 88 cents.

For Christmas morning, the family is looking forward to a big breakfast. A box of Cheerios cost \$2.49, while a dozen eggs are \$1.89 and bacon is \$3.99.

Bread is 99 cents, while three bags of milk are \$3.69. A carton of orange juice rings in at \$3.27, while a can of apple juice is \$1.09. A small jar of Taster's Choice coffee on sale is \$4.99, down from \$6.29.

Being Christmas, the family decides to treat themselves. A box of eight candy canes costs 99 cents, a

box of Pot of Gold chocolates is \$5.99, a large tin of shortbread cookies is \$9.99.

Because the family will have friends visiting, they bought a large bottle of wine at \$10.95 and a six-pack of beer for \$8.95.

The family also buys a few Christmas items for the house — a string of lights for \$9.99, down from the regular price of \$19.99, a wreath for the door, on sale for \$14.99 from \$29.99, and a Santa ornament on sale for \$6.49.

Factor in \$25 for a tank of gas to get around town to make the purchases. The grand total to put on a Christmas for four? \$592.54.

Hardly pocket change.

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