

GIVING TREE *from page 1A*

Ambrosio is on the front lines of some of the hardships that the more rural residents of the Siuslaw region face. There’s not a lot of businesses north of town, so Twin Lakes is sort of a community hub, with various ads and community notes filling the walls of the small store.

“The economy has been hard on people in a rural area,” she said. “You’ve got bigger properties, with more people living on the property. And then the holidays come and maybe you’ve got little kids. The money is going to the little kids. Christmas is 12 and under. The older kids get jaded, yet they really need things.”

Ambrosio started the program six years ago, soon after she opened the store. Back then, the area was still suffering from the recession and poverty was rampant.

“Things have changed,” Ambrosio said. “People have cash, not necessarily food stamps. The marijuana laws changed, and all those people got jobs because of it. That’s changed the dynamics. They’re working, they’re doing what they love. I’ve seen a big difference in the past couple of years.”

But not everything is better.

While the production and sale of legal marijuana has lifted some of her customers’ fortunes, drugs such as meth have ruined others.

“There’s always the bottom of the coin, there’s always people who have hardships,” Ambrosio said. “I’ve got a lot of grandparents in this town who are raising their children because their parents got into drugs. ... It’s getting worse, drugs. It’s hard. We just had a family where the mom died. She’s gone, and the grandmother is taking care of the kids.”

Ambrosio felt that she needed to help in some way. She grew up in Portland, where her mother encouraged Ambrosio and her sisters to help the community. She saw a lot of hard Christmases in the city and didn’t want that for the Siuslaw.

She believes that by helping out teenagers when they are vulnerable, perhaps they will help out the community when they get on their feet.

“This way they can learn that one person can make a difference, and maybe in the future one of those teenagers can do something like this for people in their community in their future,” Ambrosio said. “It’s a way of teaching these kids that one person can make a difference in people’s lives. All they’ve got to do is think out of the box, take a breath and do it.”

Ambrosio has seen a lot of teenagers in need. Last year she helped bring Christmas to 28 kids, though this year she’s aiming for 40.

She can always tell when a teenager is new to the



**Twin Lakes Store owner Vicki Ambrosio (right) and employee Karen Crowder help plan the Twin Lakes Giving Tree for teens living rurally and north of Florence. There will be a Distribution Party on Thursday, Dec. 20, at Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue’s Sutton Lake Fire Station starting at 6 p.m. Everyone is invited to celebrate.**

program.

“You can tell that this guy has never been on our Giving Tree because he didn’t ask for much,” Ambrosio said, showing off the gift idea wish list for a 13-year-old.

Needs: Socks and underwear.

Wants: Art supplies and books, hair gel, deodorant, body spray.

Educational Needs: Books. “I say ask for the moon,” Ambrosio said. “So that’s where they’ll put their video games. There’s been a few tablets, like Kindle Fire, asked for. So that’s a big-ticket item, but other than that they’re just asking for things that adults take for granted, but these teenagers really need.”

The teenagers who have been around the Giving Tree block a few times don’t hold back in what they ask for: Cell phones, radio-controlled cars or trucks, blue-tooth headphones. And of course, video games. This year’s big ask is “Call of Duty Black Ops.”

“I know a lot of people don’t like to buy games for kids, so I personally do,” she said. “I buy the things that the community doesn’t understand. These kids ask for Supernatural memorabilia. People don’t know what that

is. Or steampunk. I have to Google some of these things, and then spend that money on them. That’s the magical part of Christmas, what they really want. It’s amazing.”

She’s able to afford to buy the gifts directly because of a new fundraiser she started with her business. Whenever someone comes in to deposit their used bottles, they have the opportunity to put the deposit money aside for the Giving Tree.

“Ten cents a can,” Ambrosio said. “Neighbors are bringing in their bottles and give them to me to save for Christmas presents. I’ve got a big cabin that’s next door for the bottles.”

It’s been a windfall for the program, allowing Ambrosio to get more gifts for more teenagers, who can be hard to shop for.

“You know how teenagers want what they want,” she said. “They’re picky, I tell people. Get what they write on the list. They’re very particular on their wish lists. ‘I want a long sleeve camo shirt.’ Buy them that, that’s what they want. That’s what will make them happy.”

Once the gifts are purchased, Ambrosio and her friends, including her employees, wrap the gifts.

“We have a day for stock-

ing stuffing, a day to fill food bags, and then two days for wrapping,” said Karen Crowder, who works at Twin Lakes. “I love this Giving Tree, I love what she’s done. It just makes such a difference in kids’ lives. We’re all on board. Just seeing the joy, and the surprise. These kids are just awed that people did this for them.”

Crowder introduced herself as the “Number One Elf” when talking about the project. She even dresses up as an elf when they have the Distribution Party each year. This year’s party is on Thursday, Dec. 20, at Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue’s Sutton Lake Fire Station. Everyone is invited: The kids, the parents, those who bought the presents and

community members.

“It starts at 6 p.m. promptly, and you can’t be late,” Ambrosio said. “It’s crazy until 7:30. It’s like Christmas morning. Oh my God, all in an hour, BAM! Food, stock-

ing and tons of presents.”

At the party, the teenagers open the stockings because “you have to, it’s so much fun,” Ambrosio said. It was always her goal to have the kids take the presents home, but usually it doesn’t work out that way.

“They try to open at least one present or two, and take the others home,” she said. “Then they get caught up in the moment, and the next thing you know, it’s all unwrapped. Even as they’ve got a grandma there saying, ‘Nope, they’ve got to go home.’”

It is fun for the teens, and it is fun for the families.

“It’s a chaotic event, like Christmas morning,” Ambrosio said. “It’s something to see. The people who buy these gifts will come to the party just to watch and eat and be part of the festivities. They can see where their money went and how impressed that the kids are. The parents cry because it’s such a relief for the parents who are buying their little kids presents and can’t really afford to buy their teenagers something.

“We’re all family on that day.”

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