

# Elf Louise's sleigh ride of yuletide kindness

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Photo: Tom Reel /San Antonio Express-News

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A team of elves gets working instructions before going out to deliver presents as Louise Locker's holiday program for the poor, the Elf Louise Christmas Project, distributes Christmas gifts to children on the ... [more](#)

The cavernous warehouse that serves as Santa's workshop for the Elf Louise Christmas Project stands near the intersection of Industrial Park Road and Shop Lane.

But if an address described karmic impact instead of geographic location, the space would occupy the corner of Belief Street and Dream Drive.

Louise Locker created the program in 1969 with a belief in the better nature of humankind and a dream to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children.

Her vision since has bloomed into a beloved yuletide tradition that has delivered Christmas gifts and cheer to more than 1 million youngsters, a tradition nourished by the bottomless goodwill of strangers, whether the thousands of volunteers who sustain the effort each year or the thousands more who make charitable donations.

“People say, ‘You’re so great.’ But this isn’t just me. I’m only one small part of it,” said Locker, 68, who launched her program as a 19-year-old freshman at Trinity University. “It’s beautiful to me that so many people come together to make something magical happen.”

Her philanthropic sleigh ride began nearly a half-century ago after listening to Johnny Carson read children’s letters to Santa on “The Tonight Show” a few days before Christmas.

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Moved and motivated, Locker visited a local post office and pored over dozens of letters that kids had written to the North Pole’s most famous resident.

She selected a handful of wish lists and took them home to her mother, telling her they needed to find 200 gifts for 65 children. Anne Locker, who worked a minimum-wage job, never flinched.

“My mama didn’t say, ‘That’s a great idea, but we don’t have the time or money,’” said Locker, who had lost her father, Ernest, a year earlier. “No, she jumped in and said, ‘We’re doing this.’”

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Mother and daughter gathered items around the house that fit the description of gifts in the letters. Locker approached customers at a coffee shop to solicit toy donations, and several later dropped off presents at the house.

Enlisting the help of friends, one of whom donned a Santa suit and fake beard, Locker pulled off her first Christmas miracle on Dec. 24, 1969, as she and her merry band of elves brought presents to every kid on her personal Santa's list.

In the ensuing decades, her whimsical impulse has scaled into a yearlong enterprise with citywide reach, relying on 5,000 volunteers who fan out from the warehouse on San Antonio's Southwest Side to deliver gifts to 20,000 children every December.

An annual radiothon hosted by WOAI since 1995 has raised more than \$3 million for the nonprofit program, including \$200,000 this year.

Meanwhile, the program's spirit — embodied by the unsinkable Locker, who in recent years has survived breast cancer and a heart attack — has stayed true to the ethos that inspired her fateful visit to the post office way back when.

"There's so much goodness in the world, and I think people feel a profound need to connect," said Locker, whose Elf Louise moniker was bestowed by an Express-News reporter in the program's early years, when she sought to conceal her identity. "They're looking for soulful encounters."

Her program provides an opportunity for unity at a time of deepening political and cultural discord nationwide. Volunteers whose views may be poles apart come together at a mythical North Pole and then set off to distribute kindness across the city.

"Because of everything that's happening in the world, people get caught up in that and sometimes see things through a dark lens," said Locker, who squeezes in her Elf Louise duties around her everyday role as a clinical social worker.

"But I've always asked total strangers to be involved because I believe people want to help. We can all be so unconnected sometimes, and I want people to imagine a world where everyone acts on their goodness."

The longevity of Locker's brainchild has nurtured a generational cycle of giving. Children who received gifts through the Elf Louise Christmas Project have volunteered years later to wrap gifts, play an elf or dress up as Santa.

Just like Locker did in 1969 — and still does today — they believe in the need to aid others and want to make dreams come true for youngsters throughout the city.

"Hope allows us to persevere when there's nothing else working out," she said. "I'm hoping that what we do serves as an example that anyone can take something that they feel strongly about and bring it to life."

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## **Martin Kuz**

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