

# *The Story of The Gift*

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## ***Originally written by Dave Gahagen***

This is the story of a dream that came true. The idea of producing The Gift originated over thirty years ago when two Notre Dame De Namur University employees, Michael Elkins and Steve Furgas, began discussing establishing a Christmas tradition in the Bay Area. Their idea was a Christmas musical theatre production with a different approach: Admission would be free— a gift— so anyone who would like to could attend. Those who were able would be encouraged to bring food or new toys that would be distributed to people in need at Christmas. What better theme for such a project than the story of Ebenezer Scrooge's redemption as told in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol?

They approached Notre Dame de Namur University and were granted the use of the theatre and one evening in Ralston Mansion. Having a theatre to house the production, they still needed sets, costumes, properties, music, royalties, and countless other resources for the production. They could not pay a staff or even assure actors that anyone would come to see the show. Nonetheless, the two men were able to gather a group of highly talented people willing to give freely of their time and talents in order to bring this gift to the community. They named this collection of performers and artists The Performance Group. Local businesses were contacted for supplies and services needed to make the show a reality. Their generous donations were (and continue to be) instrumental in producing The Gift.

The first year, veteran director Tony Orazem agreed to stage the show with Lita Liebech as Music Director and Tony Anderson providing choreography. There were only four performances to half-full houses. In total, a few hundred items of food and toys were collected. The second year, Tony Orazem returned as Director and was joined by his wife Julia Orazem as Music Director.

As word of The Gift has spread attendance has increased substantially every year. Additional performances have been scheduled to accommodate the ever-growing number of people wanting to see the production, and we are fortunate to fill almost every seat for each of the nine performances. Thanks to the generosity of audiences, over three tons of food and hundreds of toys are collected and distributed to those in need each year. The food is distributed to nearly a dozen Peninsula food banks and the toys go to Toys for Tots.

Over the years, the casts and crews of the Christmas production have included talented performers and technicians of all ages. Notre Dame de Namur University students, faculty and staff today fill many of the critical on-stage and backstage roles. Scores of community performers and technicians, many with professional resumes and credentials, continue to serve as the backbone for this highly regarded and beloved Christmas musical tradition. Many of the staff and cast members return year after year because of the special place the show has in their hearts. Instead of being the dream of just a few people, The Gift now belongs to everyone involved in making the production come to life as well as to the audiences, who return year after year to both give and receive the goodwill of the Season.

This year, as in years past, all performances are free to the public except for the opening night Gala. Although The Gift's production costs are primarily supported through donated services and materials, the Gala ticket sales and cash donations are needed to help offset production costs including royalties.

A new generation of community organizers and volunteers work throughout the year to devise new and challenging projects and activities to support and improve The Gift each year. In addition to the demanding performance schedule at the NDNU Theatre each December, performers from the production travel to the Tenderloin in San Francisco and to several events on the Peninsula to spread Christmas cheer. This serves to remind Bay Area residents of the wonderful, unique holiday magic that takes place every December in the Notre Dame Theatre in Belmont, California.