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Catherine Porter

David Rothberg has given you the best Christmas present.

You don't even know the man? That makes it even better!

Who doesn't love an unexpected gift from an absolute stranger? Think of this as the opera singer who belts out Handel's *Messiah* on the subway platform on Christmas Eve — a little magic to remind us for a breathless moment that we are all in this together.

Rothberg's present: three full days of public skating at three rinks in the city's west end over the holiday. And not just skating, but also cups of hot chocolate and bowls of hot soup, still-warm slices of bread and maybe some gooey macaroni and cheese inside warm rink houses.

Normally those rink houses would be locked on Christmas and closed early on Boxing Day and New Year's. But Rothberg has paid the city to staff the rink houses for full hours on those days. Total cost: \$739.86. Now, if you have never visited Dufferin Grove or Wallace Emerson or Campbell Rink, you might be wondering which city rink staff bake bread and ladle out soup?

You'd be right to wonder. The park staff at my east-end rink work their iPhones in concrete offices, dying of boredom.

The three rinks Rothberg is supporting are special. They are the work of Jutta Mason, a twinkly-eyed grandmother who discovered, years ago, the secret ingredient to building community in winter: food, fire and skate rentals.

She started with the once-forlorn Dufferin Grove rink house, renovating the place with a wood-burning stove, a kitchen and a little kids' library so that, voilà, it became a community centre. Now, hungry shinny players limp off the ice for a game of backgammon and a warm homemade pizza before charging back out for another game.

Over the past few years, Mason has shared the blueprints with two other rinks in her ward, transforming their hollow bunkers into buzzing community cafes, and giving the rest of us wintry destinations for a weekend visit. (You can rent skates at each place for \$2.)

Rothberg helped with that too. This past summer, his money paid to buy industrial sinks and fridges for each rink.

So, who is this guy? I called him up to find out. "I run a hedge fund on Bay St.," he says. He is also a father and a jock. He skates three times a week, often at Dufferin Grove. He, like me, is a big proponent of Mason's magic — the conversion of public space into community spaces.

"If there ever was a city that needs public space so people can get to know each other, it's this one," says Rothberg, 61. "If it doesn't strike you within 15 seconds of walking into Dufferin Grove, you are insensate. There's good food, people are friendly, they bake bread. It's like living in a village.

"All of Toronto should operate like that."

If you've followed this column, you'll know that Mason's model has come under siege by city bureaucrats fixated on rigid job descriptions and liability clauses. Last February, her offer to bring hot chocolate and fund city staff to run a skating party for Jane-Finch youth in Etobicoke was rejected. (After I wrote about it, Doug Ford stepped in and the hot chocolate arrived.) But, local councillor Ana Bailao says there has been a softening. In the past, Mason's small, non-profit organization, called CELOS (the Centre for Local Research Into Public Space) hired part-time city staff during their off hours to do those atypical things — bake bread, cook soup, sharpen and loan out skates. The profits paid for their salaries, Mason said.

Now, the city is paying them, and CELOS is using profits to donate the equivalent of their salaries to the city. Bureaucratic convolutions?



Playing hockey at the rink at Dufferin Grove Park. Businessman David Rothberg has paid to keep the rink open on Christmas, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

Colin McConnell/Toronto Star

Whatever. It's made the difference, according to Bailao.

"Staff are finally onside, recognizing we have something good here and wanting to find a way to make it work," she says. "We're trying to make something that can be replicated around the city."

Consider that idea your New Year's inspiration. How could you, like Mason, transform your abandoned rink house into a community hub? Maybe you should write a cheque, like Rothberg.

I leave you with that thought. I'm off to Dufferin Grove with my daughter for a spin around the ice and some curry soup. I've been grouchy this week, griping at my hefty pre-Christmas to-do list. An unplanned outing with my family is just what I need to remind me what this holiday is about.

If I don't see you there, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

And thank you, David Rothberg.

Catherine Porter's column usually runs on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca