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No gift ideas? Alternative options exist at holidays

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Today is the day.

Holiday music chimes as you saunter through stores.

Heaps of clothes bearing drastically slashed prices entice you to open your wallet.

The crowds are alive with joy.

Then come the snide comments, frustrated pushing and jammed parking lots, long lines and sheer intolerance.

That's when it suddenly hits you that Black Friday has fully taken on its ominous name, forcing some people to wonder why they allow themselves to get caught up in the holiday craze.

There is a solution to this madness: the sometimes forgotten or unfamiliar option of alternative gift-giving.

Many nonprofit, environmental and religious organizations offer shoppers the option to buy gifts for loved ones that offer benefits to the environment, developing countries, soldiers at the front and other humanitarian efforts.

For New Haven resident Kemerer Edwards, 78, keeping the holiday spirit in terms of gifts for his wife, four daughters and 12 grandchildren was an annual challenge until he discovered Alabama-based Heifer International 10 years ago.

"I can't think of presents for everybody, and besides, I hate to spend a lot of money for things that you know may not be appreciated or go to waste or even in the trash," said Edwards.

With Heifer International, Edwards found he could spend as little as \$10 to buy livestock in his relatives' name that the 62-year-old organization, in turn, donates to a hungry or struggling family located anywhere from Appalachia to Africa. The animals, whether rabbits, a goat or a cow, is meant to provide the families with nutrition, income and ultimately hope, according to Patricia Stanley, Heifer's regional spokeswoman for Connecticut.

As part of the Heifer project, she added, the recipient families are required to "pass on" the gifts by giving another needy neighbor the offspring to promote a self-sustaining village. Since its start in 1944, Heifer has helped 38 million people, Stanley said.

Edwards, who spends about \$1,000 annually at www.heifer.org, said his wife is pleased when he "gives" her a water buffalo and his grandchildren are happy when they get gift cards saying they share three rabbits with children in Ecuador.

World Vision, a Christian relief agency, similarly offers a gift card as an alternative holiday surprise.

Though the agency also offers animal donations to the individuals in its 100-country service

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area, World Vision spokeswoman Karen Kartes said it also offers thoughtful gifts for loved ones that can save lives for the same as the cost of a movie.

"The impact of alternative giving really hits you when you do a 'cost comparison' with common gifts," said Kartes. "For example, instead of buying a newly released DVD movie for \$20, you can purchase mosquito nets for a family to protect them against malaria while they sleep. Malaria kills in the developing world."

Other items in the online catalog at www.worldvision.org include birth certificates, stethoscopes, bikes, hygiene kits and clean water.

If saving the world isn't a priority for, say, your brother-in-law, but preserving the environment is, several organizations also meet those earthly needs.

The National Arbor Day Foundation's Gift Tree program offers tree plantings in honor of people living or deceased.

In New Haven, the Southern Connecticut Regional Water Authority sells annual or biannual permits, ranging from \$20 to \$50, for people to hike, fish, ride horses, cross-country ski and generally enjoy its eight recreation areas from Bethany to Killingworth that are otherwise closed to the public.

New Jersey resident Jacin Page, whose family owns Page Hardware & Appliance Co. in Guilford, is also accepting gift donations in honor of family members or in general to send to American soldiers based in Iraq.

Page, 25, will accept the donations on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the family's 9 Boston St. shop; she will pass along donations to Connecticut soldiers through www.anysoldier.com.

"The day after Thanksgiving is (also) going to be madness with everyone getting gifts for their loved ones. Even if they picked up one extra thing and bring it by, you're reminding someone over there we haven't forgotten them this holiday," said Page.

Seniors also should not be forgotten, according to John Dwan, who co-owns Home Instead Senior Care in Orange.

The nationwide agency, which provides nonmedical services to seniors, wants people to remember that the "Be a Santa to a Senior" program gives families a way to give to senior citizens who have no family during the holidays.

"There are a whole bunch of people, who if you don't remember them, Christmas is just another day for them," he said.

The agency asks for willing individuals to pick up ornaments from wreaths and trees in Milford's Bank of America, Lee Lund Studio of Dance, Naugatuck Savings Bank in Ansonia and TD Banknorth in Hamden.

People can then purchase the gift the seniors noted on the ornaments and return them by Dec. 9, Dwan said.

According to Sharon Bond, a spokeswoman for the Giving USA Foundation in Glenview, Ill., charitable giving has been a growing trend.

Bond said its annual report states that Americans contributed \$260.28 billion in 2005, or \$15 billion more than 2004, mostly because of major natural disasters in the United States.

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