BY BARB MOSHER, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It began as a chance encounter just inside the front door of the Village Market grocery store in Elk Rapids: a young mom feeling the additional stress of Christmas preparations and expectations, her four-year-old son caught up in the pure joy of seasonal sights and sounds, and an older woman with a soft spot for children.

“I had just put Luke in the cart, and she came up and asked if she could give him a dollar,” explained Kristie Wolgamott. “He was super happy. It just made his day, and I thanked her for slowing me down and reminding me of the meaning of Christmas.”

It was early December 2010. The random act of kindness from a complete stranger impacted Kristie so much that she wrote a letter to the editor of the Elk Rapids News. She thanked the “dear woman who not only made my son’s day but also touched my heart with the joy of Christmas.”

“I thought, there’s not enough positive news out there,” Kristie said. “I wanted to acknowledge this little, kind thing to bring some positivity to the world, and so she would know we appreciated it.”

She signed it “Kristie and Luke Wolgamott, Kewadin,” and assumed it would be the conclusion to a heartwarming but one-time occurrence.

But Kathy McKeon, the mysterious “Dollar Lady,” recalls feeling that wasn’t the end of it. “I thought for some reason or another that I’d meet up with them again,” she said. “I didn’t know how, but I just knew.”

It would be the following December before Kathy re-entered Luke’s and Kristie’s lives. Remembering the joy and sincere appreciation a simple dollar had prompted, she looked up their address and mailed Luke a Christmas card. Kristie thanked their “Christmas Angel” with another letter-to-the-editor. “The fact that she remembered us a year later put a huge smile on Luke’s face and made me appreciate the kindness of others once again,” she wrote.

More cards followed on Valentine’s Day, Easter, Halloween, and of course, every Christmas, signed by Kathy and her cat, Morris. They always included a dollar and sometimes small gifts: stickers, an ornament, reindeer “food” made from oats and glitter. When she learned through a mutual friend that Luke has an older brother, Jack, Kathy began including him.

And yet the Wolgamotts still only knew her by her first name. Part of the fun was in the mystery. Classified ads replaced letters to the editor as a way for the family to communicate with Kathy. “Secret Angel – Thank you so much for my birthday card and generous gift. I loved the seven balloons you put on the envelope! I had a fun summer. I hope you did, too. Luke W.,” read one.

Some of the many ornaments that Kathy has gifted to Luke and Jack. Photo by Kristie Wolgamott
Kristie and the boys wanted to do more, though, so they began to occasionally leave notes and cards with small gifts of appreciation for Kathy at the Village Market: handmade ornaments, school photos, a snow globe, candy, a bracelet. They alerted her with classified ads: “Kathy – We have left you a little package at the Village Market. We hope you like it. Luke and Jack.”

“Oh, they’ve given me a lot of nice, nice things,” Kathy said. “I’ve got them sitting around. And their pictures always have a significant spot on my refrigerator, right up there with the rest of them.”

“The rest of them” are Kathy’s four grandchildren, five great-grandchildren, and three great-great-grandchildren. You see, it’s not a lack of children in her own family that motivates her. It’s just that she’s never met a child who didn’t capture her heart.

“I think it’s their innocent little faces and their smiles,” she said. “I guess it’s like in the Bible where Jesus says, ‘Let the little children come unto me.’ Not that I’m taking His place, but I’m just drawn to them.”

In 2014, their paths unexpectedly crossed again when Kathy attended a Lakeland Elementary School Christmas concert to watch a friend’s granddaughter sing. Luke’s and Jack’s classes were involved as well. “She came up to us at the concert and introduced herself,” Kristie said. “She let me take a picture of her with the boys.”

The unique friendship continues to this day — cards and tokens of affinity exchanged between relative strangers who share the joy of simply making each other’s day a little brighter. Face-to-face interactions have been rare, but they aren’t the basis of their affection; it’s more about the ingenuous nature of an uncluttered relationship. “There’s a purity to it,” Kristie said. “We don’t overthink it.”

Luke is now 14, an eighth grader at Cherryland Middle School; Jack is a 16-year-old sophomore at Elk Rapids High School. They’re every bit as appreciative of the Dollar Lady as they were in grade school.

“She’s a sweet lady, very kind,” Luke said. “She remembers every birthday, every holiday. It’s part of my life. It’s cool!”

“She reminds me to be nice,” Jack added. “She doesn’t know how we’re doing or what’s going on in our lives, but when I get a card, it makes me happy. We don’t know what others are going through, so it’s important to just be nice.”

Health issues necessitated that Kathy move this summer from her Alden-area home to be closer to family in Davison, Michigan. But it hasn’t changed a thing between her and the Wolgamott boys, except they finally learned her last name so they can send her mail.

“I’ve always sent them sports-related ornaments, because they’re so involved in sports,” Kathy said. “This year, because of Covid, I thought, man, they didn’t get to play sports. So, I sent them each a car ornament. And I sent money and said, ‘Here’s gas money for your cars!’ I wanted to bring a smile to their faces. Those boys are very special to me. They’ll remain in my heart forever.”