

**ENVIRONMENTAL HOME**

# Christmas shopping for the ones you love

**By Dan Howard**  
FOR TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

Christmas is a wondrous and joyous time of year. It's a time of giving, caring and sharing.

That time of beauty is also a time of fires, carbon monoxide poisonings, falls and other tragedies in homes.

These stories are sad any time of year, but particularly during the time that is supposed to be a celebration of joy. Many times, a few timely gifts such as smoke detectors, carbon monoxide detectors, proper extension cords or a service call for a furnace could make the difference between life and death, or inconvenience and homelessness.

Sometimes it's a senior, sometimes a financially struggling family, other times it is a person with health challenges. Some people have the toughest time recognizing what they need to do or buy to keep themselves and their homes safe.

What better gift to give than one that could save the life of someone you love?

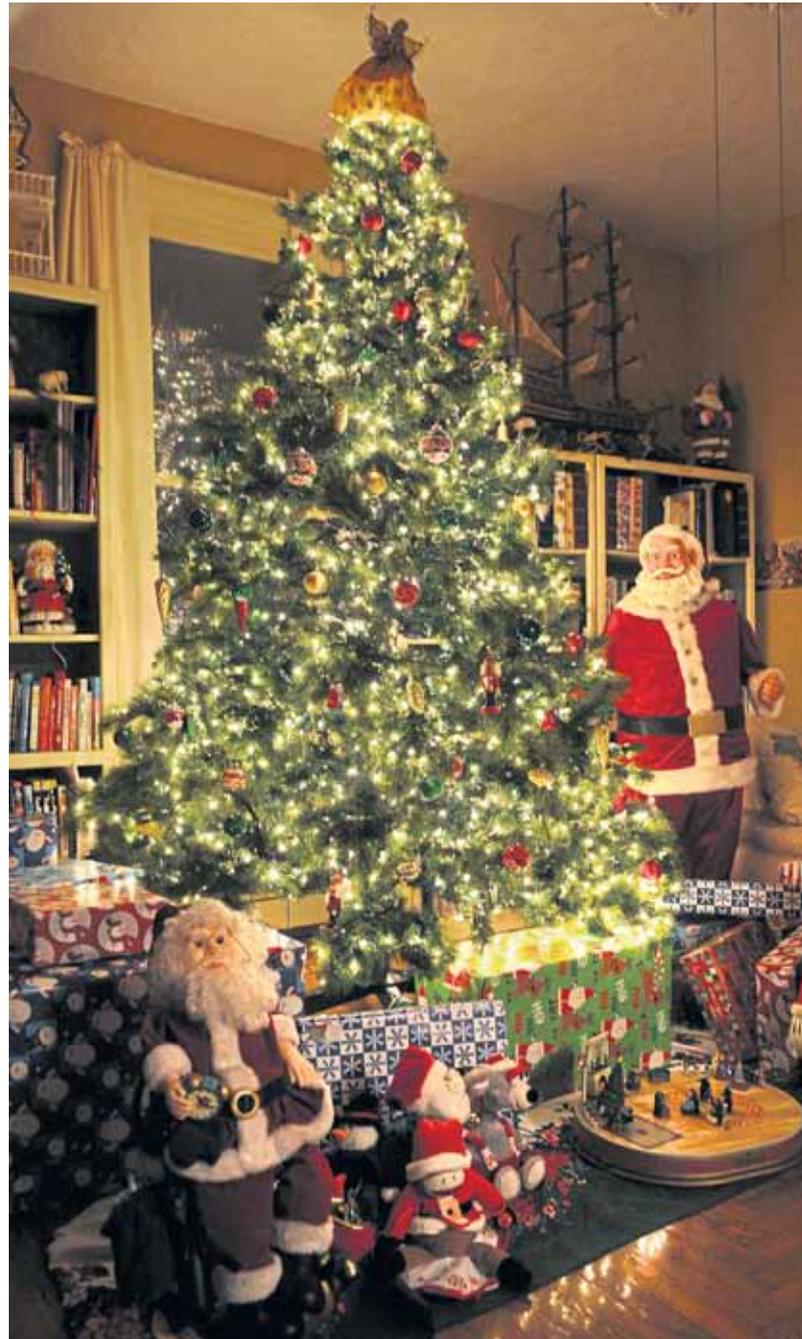
Writing this article reminds me about what my dad did during winter weather. When all of the kids came over for dinner on Sundays, he would disappear for about 15 minutes. He would sneak outside with rags and a bucket of windshield washer liquid. He cleaned all of our windshields and headlights. He quietly came back in when he was done.

We usually didn't even know a thing about it until we went to our cars. Never, ever did we ever talk about it. The message was simple, and we all knew that he loved us.

That is exactly the kind of gift I am suggesting here.

Giving new smoke detectors, or even changing the batteries in existing smoke detectors, is easy to do and inexpensive. Even 15 seconds of warning about a fire can be the difference in survival.

If the "change the battery" idea



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Consider a few timely gifts to keep friends and family safe.

sounds strange to you, imagine the senior who can't climb a ladder or the young family who used all of their batteries for their children's toys. Getting up to a smoke detector to change the battery could be as far as the moon for a senior who had a broken hip.

Carbon monoxide detectors are as important as smoke detectors. Purchase carbon monoxide detectors that have both a digital readout and a loud alarm. The "sound only" CO

detectors have a delay that allows levels in some models as high 400 PPM (parts per million) without making a peep. The threshold level that is considered unsafe is 10 PPM.

The digital readout allows earlier warnings and is well worth the difference in cost. Make sure the detectors are installed near gas appliances or warm air furnace vents and where the residents can see the reading.

There will be many tragic news stories over the holidays that have

their start with a furnace that was defective or not working at all. People freezing or ill from a malfunctioning furnace is one set of problems. Carbon monoxide poisoning or fires can be other outcomes.

Having a furnace serviced and the needed repairs completed for someone in need can be a very loving gift. A service call where the furnace operation and vent system are checked and adjusted usually costs between \$75 and \$150. It is a great idea to make sure that the gas lines or oil lines and tanks are checked at the same time.

Taking the time to help someone apply for LIHEAP fuel assistance could be a gift of an hour's time that makes winter bearable for someone in need. This can be done online at [dhs.pa.gov](http://dhs.pa.gov).

There are a number of things to check in a home when someone is using supplemental heaters to try to stay warm. Check the heaters themselves for evidence of wear, fraying or burning. If there is any damage to the heater, it needs to be replaced.

Check the area where the heater is located. Make sure there is a safe distance from combustible materials and surfaces. Oil-filled heaters are generally safer than those with exposed elements.

Giving heavy duty electrical extension cords and checking that they are plugged in to outlets designed to carry the load can save lives. Too many people fall victim to the logic that the cord that did not burn the last time they used it will be safe the next time. That's just not how it works.

Go to a quality hardware store and purchase cords that are rated at 14-2 for 15-amp circuits or 12-2 for 20-amp circuits.

If there is a fireplace or wood burner in use, have the chimney checked. The high temperatures of burning wood and then cooling off damages the chimney. Wood leaves a flammable creosote coating that can ignite and start a house fire.

The cost of cleaning and checking a chimney is typically between \$150 and \$200. That is a wonderful gift for a family you care about. Check with the National Chimney Sweep Guild ([ncsg.org](http://ncsg.org)) to find a qualified technician.

The issues of home health and safety can become more complicated than the examples above. Just as parents, family and friends can help with the other important issues above, a significant portion of Sick Building Syndrome work is arranged by caring family members rather than the residents of the sick or moldy building.

Picture the family with asthmatic children, or the senior who has pneumonia four times in a year. These and hundreds of other health issues are often the result of environmental problems that need to be corrected. Caring relatives or friends can arrange for the needed assessment and testing.

The big problem with this issue is finding qualified professionals working with accurate laboratories. A recent development is helping bring dependable environmental testing across the country. To find the right person serving where your family member lives, try [iaqa.org](http://iaqa.org).

The Christmas season is the time of year we give the very best. Taking the time to notice what someone you love really needs is about as good as the joy of gift-giving gets. I can clean my own windshield and lights, but I do miss my dad being there and sneaking out to do it, just because he cared.

For more information and additional links, go to [Enviroinspect.com/ChristmasGifts](http://Enviroinspect.com/ChristmasGifts).

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