

Christmas comes a little early

By Reggie Jarrell, rijarrell@qconline.com

MOLINE -- Shortly after starting her afternoon break, Shirley Umporowicz was called to the office to complete some insurance paperwork -- or so she thought.

Instead Ms. Umporowicz, a teacher at Skip-A-Long Child Development Services in Moline, was surprised with a \$5,000 check from the Royal Neighbors of America "Nation of Neighbors" gift patrol Thursday.

"I'm shocked. I don't know what to say," Ms. Umporowicz said, clearly moved by the unexpected gift. "I had no idea. I was totally shocked, totally surprised."

And she already knows what she's going to do with the money.

"I am going to buy a car, definitely," the mother of three adult daughters said. "We need a car desperately."

Two of her daughters, along with one of her two grandchildren, live with Ms. Umporowicz in Colona.

She's worked at Skip-A-Long for more than seven years, and has gotten to work the same way all that time. Every day she takes two buses to, and from, work -- a 75-minute commute each way.

By car, the trip would normally take 20 to 30 minutes each way.

Her supervisor nominated Ms. Umporowicz for the gift several weeks ago, but Ms. Umporowicz didn't think anything more about it -- although she knew the organization had a history of helping people.

Besides addressing her family's transportation needs, the money will help ease some of Ms. Umporowicz's misgivings about this holiday season.

Recent deaths in her family -- her mother died two years ago, her father last September -- "I was feeling a little depressed," she said. "I thought this Christmas was going to be a little somber. I wish they were here to see this. I feel wonderful, I just feel great."



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Photo: Paul Colletti

Shirley Umporowicz of Colona laughed when she was surprised with a \$5,000 check from Royal Neighbors of America on Thursday, Dec. 20. Ms. Umporowicz, a teacher at Skip-A-Long Development Services in Moline, was nominated as a recipient in the "Nation of Neighbors" program. She said she'll spend the money on a car. Now, she said, she spends 75 minutes going to work in the morning on buses, and 75 minutes going home.

According to a media release, Royal Neighbors of America is a non-profit fraternal life insurance membership organization headquartered in Rock Island.

The "Nation of Neighbors" program will distribute \$250,000 to selected individuals or families across the country. About 80 families in the Quad-Cities area are expected to benefit from the program.

Also receiving a \$5,000 check Thursday was Billy Thorington of Davenport.

Community service organizations, Royal Neighbors of America sales agents and members submitted nominations of individuals or families for the gifts. The nominations were reviewed by a panel of judges, who made the selections and determined gift amounts.

"Everybody has been so emotional, with tears of joy" among both the gift distributors and recipients, said Rita Toalson, Royal Neighbors' marketing support manager. "It has been emotional, and we are very happy that we are able to help people."

Ms. Toalson said recipients in 14 other states would also receive checks for various amounts.

"It is all for people who are in need of some type of assistance, who are facing some challenges," she said. "We just never know what to expect, it can happen to any of us, at any time."