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A heart for veterans: 60-year-old June Christensen has made it her mission to give time to veterans

By Lois M. Collins, Deseret News
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Cottonwood High School baseball player Josh Shapiro shakes hands with a veteran while delivering poinsettias at the George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2012.

Ben Brewer, Deseret News
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Summary

June Christensen is gearing up for the holidays, finishing a yearlong shopping spree to buy gifts for veterans. It's a thank you for their service and sacrifice, as well as a memorial to her dad, a World War II vet.

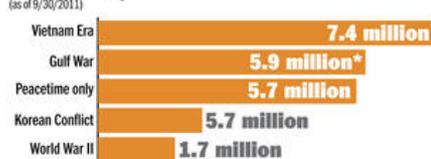
ELK RIDGE — June Christensen is gearing up for the holidays, finishing a yearlong shopping spree to buy gifts for veterans. It's a thank you for their service and sacrifice, as well as a memorial to her dad, a World War II vet.

The real gift is not socks or candy, but time spent with the veterans.

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NOTE: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Veterans may serve in multiple periods. SOURCE: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. *Includes Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC

Christensen, 60, shops the sales regularly. Near Thanksgiving, her mom, who is now 86, calls all the nursing homes and assisted living centers along the 21-mile stretch from Provo to Santaquin to identify every veteran.

"Veterans are my mom's special project," said Christensen's daughter, Leona Long. "My best Christmas Eve was when I held a Vietnam veteran's hand as he cried because my boyfriend (now husband), father and I were the only ones who

visited him during the holidays at a Provo rest home. He was one of dozens of veterans that my family gives a gift basket and visits each year."

Christensen's dad earned a Purple Heart while serving in the South Pacific. She wanted to honor others like him as she hoped people would honor him. So her five children have grown up amid efforts to brighten veterans' days, cheered on and financially supported as

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well by their dad, Ken Christensen.

Nearly two decades ago, a local American Legion Auxiliary that had been taking gift baskets to veterans on Veteran's Day decided to retire the project in favor of other tasks. The Christensens took it on as a family holiday project.

"A lot of these veterans — both men and women — don't get visitors anymore," said Long, now married and living in Fairbanks, Alaska.

If Christensen sees ChapStick on sale, she's apt to buy 100. If there's a good deal on fruit snacks, she buys cases, then breaks them up so everyone gets some. She has diabetes and is particularly careful to be sure diabetic veterans don't get sugary treats, but rather socks and other items. Sometimes, the baskets contain lap blankets, if she found some on clearance. There's always a Christmas card.

Then the gifting begins. Christensen's family and now neighbors and volunteers deliver the items. But since the biggest part of the present is presence, everyone must agree to spend some time with the veteran. There are no drop-off deliveries.

"They want to talk about their experience," Christensen said. "I thank them and tell them about my father. He was wounded twice in the South Pacific."

This year has been a rough one as she's been in and out of the hospital herself with a paralyzed stomach. Besides that, she's hobbling around in a boot from a complication of diabetes. But she's not giving up on it.

"It goes deep with me," she said, adding that she has formed bonds with some of the veterans that cover years. She's celebrated their joys and mourned their deaths.

"They want not to be forgotten," she said. She plans not to forget.

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Lois M. Collins is a reporter and columnist for the Deseret News. While she writes primarily on health and family issues for the national and news sections, she also writes a biweekly column and her work appears often in [more ..](#)

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