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**January 9, 2010**

**BIG CITY**

## **In Downturn, an Upside: Generosity**

By [SUSAN DOMINUS](#)

Recession got you down? Look on the bright side — it's not a crisis, it's a crisatunity!

That suspiciously upbeat word mash-up has become a term of art for political organizers, who usually use it in the context of e-mail messaging techniques. When such organizers try to raise awareness about a big problem — say, global poverty — they are talking about a crisis, which can evoke ennui and helplessness.

But if they can outline specific action to address a slice of the problem — sign this petition today that will embarrass this foreign government into resolving this human rights abuse! — then they've got themselves a crisatunity (pronounced CRY-sa-too-nitty). A crisis, but an opportunity!

Many social service agencies in New York stepped into December with every reason to think they would face another garden-variety crisis of the Great Recession — scant resources with which to brighten the holidays for children. “We had no idea where things were going to come from,” said Terry Troia, executive director of [Project Hospitality](#), an interfaith organization that serves the hungry and homeless on Staten Island.

But crisatunity struck — even without a campaign of alarming and action-inspiring e-mail messages. As Christmas approached, new toys flooded into Project Hospitality from unusual places, including a correctional facility whose staff that sponsored a drive. “It was a banner year,” said Ms. Troia, “and the majority of gifts that poured out were from people we'd never met before.”

The same phenomenon bowled over Carolyn McLaughlin, executive director of [BronxWorks](#), a community and social-service center that used to be called the Citizens Advice Bureau. Ms. McLaughlin estimated that she had 25 new donors providing gifts to 1,000 South Bronx children. Some of those did not exactly fit the typical local-business or corporate sponsor profile — there was a woman who had once lived at the agency's shelter, and a motorcycle club called the Legion of Doom. The gifts were also more lavish than usual — “things like electric guitars and Easy-Bake ovens and brand new bicycles,” Ms. McLaughlin said.

Reports of similar bounty came in from [Goddard Riverside Community Center](#), on the Upper West Side, [Hudson Guild](#), a settlement house based in Chelsea, and the Supportive Children's Advocacy Network,

which serves East Harlem.

ADD it to the list of upsides of the downturn: A raised awareness of hardship can spur people to help. Abortion-rights groups, which see contributions rise when their opponents are in power, have long known about crisatunity, even if they didn't call it that. This holiday season, some New York groups found they had to do less to get more, even from people who had less to give.

"It's rough out there," said Noel Andujar of Legions of Doom, who organized about 30 members to give toys to BronxWorks' Positive Living, a service for families with a member who is H.I.V. positive. "A lot of the guys in the group are laid off, but they managed to pull through and give a toy."

Ben Brandzel, who spearheaded many of [MoveOn.org's](#) e-mail campaigns, first started using the term "crisatunity" in 2007, while describing the anatomy of effective organizing e-mail to other campaigns. "The heart of the concept is that in the same moment, you take in the scope of the problem and your ability to change it for the better," he said.

He could imagine that if some of the energy channeled toward opposing President Bush's policies could be strategically refocused, in this economy, toward service and charitable giving. And if he is right, what better way than through campaigns that emphasize both the depths of a specific local crisis, and the immediate effectiveness of giving (or volunteering) year-round, not just at Christmas?

But Mr. Brandzel did not coin the term, which reeks of millennial corporatespeak; for that, we have to thank the great lexicographer (and spoofer of millennial corporatespeak), Homer Simpson. In an old episode of the show, Lisa points out to her father that the Chinese use the same word for both crisis and opportunity. Homer replies, "Yes! Crisatunity!"

For better or for worse, 2010 will surely have plenty of it.

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