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Collecting donations at this time of year is serious business for the Salvation Army. After all, bills and coins dropped in those familiar red kettles help the faith-based organization help the needy year-round.

But for one Salvation Army Bellringer, it's all horseplay.

Just ask Peggy Hogan, who will be at the Vons store in Carpinteria on Saturday helping to fill a kettle with a most unique sidekick, a miniature horse she calls Handsome.

To be classified a miniature, a horse must stand no taller than 34 inches at the base of the neck. Handsome is 33 1/2 inches.

The 7-year-old dances, rolls over and shakes hands -- make that hooves. The horse, one of four minis at Ms. Hogan's place, can honk a horn and dunk a basketball, albeit through a less-than-regulation-height hoop.

And like others who give their time to the Salvation Army at the holidays, Handsome can ring a bell.

This will be the horse's fourth time raising money.

Handsome got to this point by way of a training ethic that Ms. Hogan equates to B.F. Skinner's behavioral training. In the case of the full-size and miniature horses under Ms. Hogan's care, behavior is reinforced by way of a hand-held clicker she sets off when they do something she wants them to do and food she gives them after the behavior.

"It's how they train Shamu," said Ms. Hogan, referring to the killer whales of Sea World fame. "You can't make Shamu jump through a hoop. Shamu jumps because he wants to. That training, or positive reinforcement, is what I do. They earn their reward doing something that I'm teaching them to do by continually rewarding their efforts."

The name of her business, The Best Whisper is a Click, reflects her style of training.



*It's not a traditional bell, but then again, Handsome the miniature horse is anything but a traditional Salvation Army Bellringer. Peggy Hogan uses clicker training to teach Handsome tricks.*



*Among Handsome the horse's many tricks is honking a horn.*



"Horses still are pretty much considered farm implements or sport utility vehicles or big dogs with saddles," said Ms. Hogan. "They're pretty much asked to do things to avoid pressure. In other words, 'If you don't stop, you're going to feel the pressure of the bit. If you don't do this, you're going to feel a little spur.' "

But there are no spurs, no bits, no whips in this barn.

Clicker training, says Ms. Hogan, takes horse whispering to a different level.

Whether she takes Handsome on a walk in the neighborhood or appears with the horse at an expo, they draw a crowd. And when it's bell-ringing time, she added, people can't help but give to the cause.

"The people's faces just light up. They put money in that bucket because it's just so darn cute."

Saturday's appearance at Vons, 850 Linden Ave., starts at 1:30 p.m. Ms. Hogan said she's also been cleared for other times during the week.

