

Local women's' shelters awash in holiday baskets of a different sort

Annapolis resident fills laundry baskets with supplies as part of Holiday Homeless Drive

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A student's request for a holiday charitable donation is what first sparked yoga instructor Tina Lanzoni's interest in the nonprofit group called Giving Back, Linda's Legacy.

The nonprofit operates the Holiday Homeless Drive in Baltimore, Anne Arundel County and Washington by collecting basic necessities and delivering them to the homeless and to shelters on Christmas Eve.

This past holiday season, the group collected 1,600 donated backpacks filled with hooded sweatshirts, thermal underwear, wool socks, a hat and gloves. It also collected enough food, toiletries, gently used winter clothes and other items to fill 22 trucks.

Lanzoni wanted to take part in the holiday drive, and she also wanted to specifically reach out to women and families. So she joined the efforts of Giving Back, Linda's Legacy and coordinated her giving to a shelter for battered women and their children in Baltimore and a safe house in Anne Arundel County.

Instead of backpacks, many of the items she collected came stuffed in laundry baskets or luggage and included towels, slippers, robes, toiletries, plates, bowls, cleaning supplies and pillows.

To gather the items, she called on family, friends, students and other acquaintances for donations. One student gave \$1,000. A friend hosted a holiday party and asked anyone coming to donate a new robe, slippers or pajamas. Another student brought a carload of donated items for the Arden House, and when Lanzoni decided to also help the House of Ruth Maryland, the student came back with a second delivery that included 40 pillows.

Lanzoni estimates they gave out a dozen filled laundry baskets, about five suitcases and many other items to the Arden House in Anne Arundel County and the House of Ruth in Baltimore. Monetary donations were also made to Giving Back, Linda's Legacy. "There was an abundance of generosity from people. It was very heartwarming," said Lanzoni, the director of yoga for Evolutions Body Clinic in Annapolis.

Carrie E. Matthews, who oversees the Arden House and is the crisis intervention service coordinator for the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, said the generosity was felt by the five families staying at the safe house on Christmas Eve.

Matthews helped put a wish list together for the families and said Lanzoni collected everything on the list, including toys, clothes and shoes for the children.

"She went above and beyond, making sure the kids and moms had what they needed," said Matthews. "Her efforts were definitely heartfelt."

Likewise, Sandi Timmins, the executive director of the House of Ruth Maryland, said what made the donation special was the emphasis on collecting items that were important to the women at the shelter, such as blankets, pillows and linens.

"What I so appreciated about this was that it was so specific to what our folks need," said Timmins. "It was incredible."

Giving Back, Linda's Legacy has helped the Arden House and House of Ruth in the past, but never with as much focus as it did this year.

"These women come to the shelter many times with nothing but the clothes on their backs," said Steve Anstett, the volunteer executive director for Giving Back, Linda's Legacy. "So she [Tina] created this idea of a laundry basket full of items. She did a phenomenal job."

Anstett said the organization began more than 25 years ago, started by Linda Greenberg, an Annapolis resident at the time, who drove to Baltimore with a trunk full of clothes and handed them out to homeless men and women on the streets. From there, she began asking friends for donations, and by the time Anstett joined the organization nine years ago, the organization had five trucks delivering donated clothing and other necessities.

Greenberg, who now lives in Florida, comes back to take part each year. It was her single act of kindness, said Anstett, that led to this year's record-breaking numbers, including the largest turnout of volunteers. Of the 600 volunteers who helped with the drive, Anstett estimates about 80 percent were high school or college age.

"We create an environment where high school and college kids can come and learn about volunteering. They learn it can be fun, as well as hard work, and that it can be so rewarding," said Anstett, who works as the vice president of marketing for American Forest Products. "That's what really drives me. I'm passionate about making this a good experience for them."

Lanzoni said her motivation is a conscious one. She said she's been fortunate in her life, personally and professionally, so she feels she must give back.

Still, she acknowledges that while giving someone a robe might not make a difference, she hopes that the donations provide the women and families at the shelter and safe house "a glimmer of hope that they don't feel so alone in the situation."

For more information go to www.HomelessDrive.com.