

New nonprofit instills gift of giving

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NEW BEDFORD — Inside an old South End mill, Jim Stevens says he is slowly but surely realizing a dream. And he has 16,000 pounds of donated goods to show for it.

Since opening Mother's Day weekend, the nonprofit GiftstoGive has amassed countless clothes, toys, books and board games from generous community members and redistributed them to impoverished children across SouthCoast.

Stevens, the founder, takes little credit for the endeavor. Instead, he heaps praise on the operation's 326 volunteers and the young donors willing to part ways with things they no longer need.

"Every single kid, no matter their status, has an extra hoodie, a basketball or a game," Stevens said, sitting outside the Cove Street mill where his operation is based. "Kids are empowered through giving. They might never ordinarily consider that they have treasure, but they're the key to all this."

Stevens, 60, wants to instill in young people "a sense of social justice," and says GiftstoGive is making that happen. From reaching into their closets and donating old T-shirts, to working daylong shifts at the mill, teens are finding value in being selfless. That needy children are at the receiving end of their goodwill is an added benefit.

The concept is working beautifully now, Stevens said, but long-term success depends entirely on acquiring more donations and more volunteers of all ages, and that's the difficult part.

"What we do is simple, it's just not easy," Stevens said. "Nothing we do is rocket science. We haven't invented anything, but we need to get more people to care."

Social workers, churches and schools order goods via the organization's Web site, giftstogive.org. If the items requested are in stock, volunteers package them in bags and boxes, label them and get them to their new owners within a few days.

The need locally is great. The New Bedford school district has 550 homeless children and Fall River's school district has 200, Stevens said. That doesn't include homeless children in those cities not enrolled in school, or children who come from low-income families.

From the outside, GiftstoGive headquarters looks like many of the mills that dot the local landscape: old and abandoned. But most days, the red brick mill, built in the early twentieth century, is almost as busy as it was in its prime.

The second floor warehouse is packed with aisles of clothes, toy trucks, dolls, puzzles, strollers, car seats and backpacks sprawled out across 30,000 square feet. Busted hardwood floors and a musty odor are the lone traces of the mill's long past.

Volunteers are dressing up the white walls with bright colors and inspirational quotes from Ghandi,

Mother Teresa, Winston Churchill and other historical figures. During business hours, a radio blasts upbeat pop music through the cavernous room.

This summer, New Bedford students in the New Directions and Positive Action Against Chemical Addiction (PAACA) programs are working at the mill, many of them getting their first experience in community service.

"As much as I don't like being here sometimes, it helps me put myself in someone else's shoes and not take stuff for granted," Shalia Turner, 18, said while on a break from sorting through donations with her friends Amanda Rogers, 18, and Jazmyn Hood, 19. "It makes me feel really good."

Turner said working at the mill has brought her such fulfillment that she might return to volunteer in the fall.

Students are having a positive impact outside the mill, too, regularly cleaning up litter on nearby streets. Members of PAACA'S Green Brigade are tending to a flower garden on the property's front lawn. Last week, they planted 1,250 pumpkin seeds alongside the building, which will be harvested Oct. 24, National Make a Difference Day. Stevens said the pumpkins likely will be sold to the community, with proceeds to benefit the organization.

Despite the side projects, volunteers have not lost sight of their main focus, which is giving to children who have nothing.

Cheryl Ritchotte, a full-time volunteer from Rhode Island, said donations go through a rigorous inspection process before they are released. A sign posted on one of the shelves reads, "If you have to ask, 'Is this good or bad?' it is bad." Clothes, books and toys are supposed to be in new or like-new condition. Irreparably damaged items are thrown away.

GiftstoGive receives its share of unusual — and in some cases unusable — donations, such as dishes and silverware. The organization sells those items every other Saturday in a yard sale, and uses the money to buy socks for children.

Stevens, a South Shore resident, created GiftstoGive last year after breaking away from Cradles to Crayons, a similar nonprofit in Boston. He said he saw an unfulfilled need in the region, so with his own money and support from family, friends and investors, he rented space in the mill and last fall began preparing it for its new incarnation.

If the organization can raise more money in the coming months and develop a local board, it will be on its way to becoming a self-sustaining nonprofit. Stevens said if the model is successful, he would like to open other sites in Lawrence, Worcester and Brockton.

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