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Start of something special

Entrepreneur brings latest charitable venture to New Bedford

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By **Joe Cohen**
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NEW BEDFORD — Jim Stevens is no Santa Claus — unless Santa is a tough, seasoned businessman with a history of helping children.

Then again, maybe Jim Stevens is Santa in disguise, for his goal is to deliver gifts of clothes and other things to children in need and, at the same time, engage more affluent children and their SouthCoast elders in providing the less fortunate with a lift up.

GiftsToGive is a nonprofit corporation created by Mr. Stevens after he broke away from a similar, highly publicized organization called Cradles to Crayons that got its start in the Boston area in 2002. Just this month, Cradles to Crayons made a gift of 2,500 backpacks to social-service providers in New Bedford which will distribute them to local children who are homeless or low-income. Another 1,000 backpacks are headed to Fall River.

Mr. Stevens was one of the guiding forces behind Cradles to Crayons — someone who helped run the organization and make it work from its infancy to its becoming fairly established. He put in five years with the program, which was the idea of a former staffer in the administration of President Bill Clinton. A current executive in Cradles to Crayons, Jennifer White, spoke positively last week about Mr. Stevens' work and contributions.

For his part, Mr. Stevens says he is not trying to re-create Cradles to Crayons with GiftsToGive, but simply reworking a concept into a format he believes will work better at lower cost with a more grass-roots orientation. While he does not have the cachet of a relationship with Bill Clinton or the access to fundraising it can provide, Mr. Stevens remains confident he can overcome a range of hurdles and become fully operational later this year.

Like Ms. White's comments about Mr. Stevens, Mr. Stevens had nothing bad to say about his old organization.

Both parties are very much in agreement on one point: sadly, there are so many children who are homeless and from lower-income families in serious need of assistance that there is plenty of work to be done for everyone interested in offering a helping hand.

Mr. Stevens decided to set up shop in the city for a number of reasons, including what he perceived as a tremendous, unfilled need locally. In addition, he had the encouragement of Mayor Scott W. Lang. He also found plenty of low-cost factory space for his planned operations along with a cooperative landlord, Rick Miller. A willing architect also surfaced in the form of Kyra Lawton from Dartmouth.

Perhaps the most important immediate need was filled by Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson. Sheriff Hodgson's jail provides six inmates overseen by a corrections officer to work Mondays through Fridays at GiftsToGive's new quarters off Cove Street. The inmates are assisting Mr. Stevens in renovating the interior of the building to make it ready for GiftsToGive's operations.

In 300,000 square feet, Mr. Stevens intends to have three separate areas: one to receive used clothing and other donations, a second for sorting and cleaning and readying for use and a third for packaging items for distribution.

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Mr. Stevens said his concept calls for only distributing through social services workers, institutions and organizations, not directly to recipients.

His vision statement is: "One day, all children will be connected to the things they need. We all have gifts to give. We believe that we can reach most children that need things by connecting citizens/neighbors and leveraging existing resources. We have a low-cost, highly efficient business model that will build a connected community. This model provides immediate assistance to underprivileged children while building a foundation for service, tangible giving and social change."

Mr. Stevens' vision is not just to help the less fortunate but also the very fortunate. He believes the more affluent and their children need opportunities to get involved with charitable endeavors in a hands-on fashion, such as working in packaging clothing and other items for needy children. Family-organized drives to collect used clothing and other items — usually through religious or social organizations — also fits into the Stevens business model.

In an interview Friday inside his rented factory building, Mr. Stevens shifted quickly back and forth from the language of the committed social activist to a hard-nosed businessman who is comfortable taking on a tough challenge with little tangible reward. Mr. Stevens is 58, a resident of the South Shore and has a lengthy resume that includes stints in major corporations and with smaller businesses — often with a heavy dose of marketing. He also has been affiliated for more than 20 years with Special Olympics. He has two grown children of his own.

Much of the funding to start GiftsToGive is from friends, family and himself, Mr. Stevens said.

The social activist side of Mr. Stevens tosses out lines including "pathway for social service and justice," "36,000 nonprofits in Massachusetts of which 7,000 are focused on kids" and thoughts on how the baby boomer generation is shifting from wanting to make money to worrying about "legacy."

The business side of Mr. Stevens uses expressions such as "finished packages," "concerns about philanthropy," "business model" and "strategic differences." Mr. Stevens describes himself as a former "serial entrepreneur" and "sales and marketing guy." He is not taking a salary at GiftsToGive. Should it become highly successful, he does not believe salaries or overhead should ever be allowed to become a large part of the cost of doing business.

Mr. Stevens' interim-term goal is to get as many as four facilities such as the one under development in the city up and running, something he believes is necessary to achieve the critical mass that can assure long-term operational success. Mr. Stevens is optimistic he can be open to receive used clothing and other donated items by late October and begin distribution by late November.

He has no illusions that he is Santa Claus.

"If it was easy, I could fail," he says good-naturedly. "I have an efficient model; I have the skill set; it works."

In New Bedford and the surrounding environs, thousands of children are in need. "It's got legs," Mr. Stevens said optimistically, reassuring his interviewer. "It's going to be sustainable."

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