

Outreach program furnishes homes, hearts

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

PARMA — When Frank Dymeck moved with his mother and a friend from Ohio to Irondequoit almost 10 weeks ago, he hoped to start a new life. But so far he has caught few lucky breaks.

Prevented from working regularly by chronic-fatigue syndrome and manic depression, Dymeck said he had not heard whether the Department of Social Services had mailed his first disability check yet. Since they moved here, Dymeck, his roommate and his 75-year-old mother have been living off of her Social Security check in a sparsely furnished apartment.

"We need couches, end tables, chairs, beds," said Dymeck, listing some of the items he hoped to pick up from Furniture Alert, an outreach program sponsored by the Community Council of Churches, a local ecumenical group that includes St. Leo's Catholic Parish in Hilton. Furniture Alert provides donated furniture and household items free of charge to those in need.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Joe Anne Crowley-Hawley, president of Furniture Alert in Parma, stands amid numerous furniture items donated by area residents and businesses.

Joe Anne Crowley-Hawley, president of Furniture Alert, has seen hundreds of people like Dymeck walk through the agency's door, which opens into a former schoolbus garage. Since last fall, Furniture Alert has been located in the garage, which is owned by the Town of Parma. Previously, the program had been run out of an old pickle factory, the successor to a garage at St. Leo's, the first site of Furniture Alert.

Crowley-Hawley, Betty Murphy and Mary Lane — all parishioners at St. Leo's — conceived of Furniture Alert after consulting with Sister Grace Miller, RSM, of the House of Mercy in Rochester. Sister Miller gave a talk on social ministry needs during a meeting of St. Leo's social ministries group more than four years ago, and the three women decided to start collecting cast-off items from road sides to bring to the House of Mercy.

Since then, Furniture Alert has grown into a full-time volunteer job for Crowley-Hawley, who, along with Murphy and Lane, runs the operation with a handful of volunteers primarily from St. Leo's. Crowley-Hawley spends Mondays and Tuesdays picking up furniture in her Chevy truck, which she calls her "Lord-mobile."

On Wednesdays, she opens the 1,500

square feet of storage space to public perusal from 10 a.m.-8:30 p.m. On Thursdays, she's back out on the road, before she and the volunteer staff take off a three-day weekend.

People from Rochester still form the bulk of Furniture Alert's clientele, Crowley-Hawley said, but she said she had delivered furniture to homes in Albion, Brockport and other area communities. Migrant workers, battered women, handicapped persons, refugee immigrants, rehabilitating drug addicts and alcoholics have all joined people with no extraordinary challenges — save low incomes — in crossing Furniture Alert's threshold, she observed.

A significant number of the clients have lost their homes and furniture in fires, Crowley-Hawley said, recalling a Brockport couple who recently contacted Furniture Alert after a fire destroyed much of their home.

"The couple had rented a U-Haul truck, and we filled it up," she remembered. "(The woman) cried because we helped her so much."

Turning tears of sorrow to tears of joy is what motivates Crowley-Hawley to get up four days a week and spend time doing the kind of hard physical labor most people would do only for pay.

"Yes, the Lord pays me," she answered in response to a question about the compensation she receives. "I get an awful lot of tremendous, wonderful feeling out of this."

Furniture companies, nursing homes, restaurants and other organizations all have given money or merchandise to Furniture Alert, Crowley-Hawley said, but the vast

majority of the donations come from private citizens. In return for giving the program an item, a donor receives a receipt verifying their gift.

The beneficiaries of all this effort need give no referrals or background history to obtain items, Crowley-Hawley said, commenting that a prospective client need only state a need for furniture in order to obtain it.

"If people call up and say they have a need, we take them at their word," she said, dismissing any concern that some people might take advantage of the program.

"I don't worry about it," she said of potential abuse. "I'm sure it's happened. I know people have come in here to upgrade (their homes), but what can I do about that? That's on their conscience, not mine."

Crowley-Hawley estimated that "maybe a fraction of 1 percent" of the those who have received items from the agency were not actually needy.

The other 99 percent benefit from seeing Furniture Alert workers furnish clients' lives with more than just chairs, desks and sofas. They also experience the vitality of a parish actually living its faith.

"It's a great way to serve," Crowley-Hawley said, noting that she has met and served many people. "That's why I enjoy it so much."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: People in need of furniture or other household items may make appointments by calling the Furniture Alert warehouse at 716/392-9840. Those with items to donate are asked to call 716/392-8920. All donations will be listed, priced and receipted upon request.



The index box on the left keeps track of those served by Furniture Alert, while the one to the right contains information on donations.

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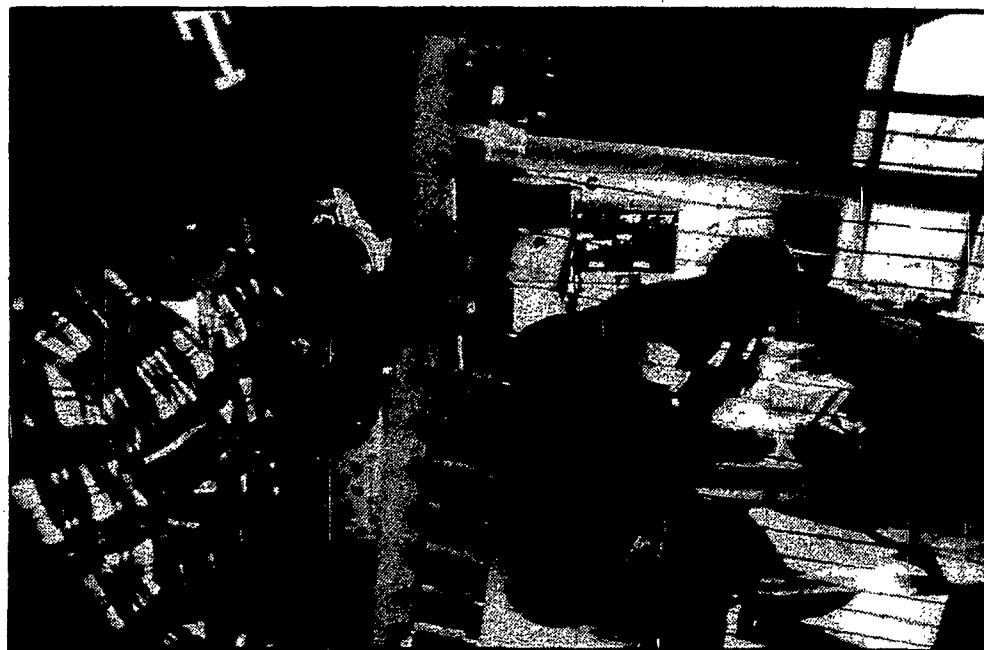
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"Smokey" Charles Taylor of Lowville, N.Y., moves a bed frame out to his truck, while Crowley-Hawley takes a phone call in the background.

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