

The Anglican Pew Magazine, - August, 2004

Exporting Compassion

A humanitarian project wins world acclaim

By Bill Smith

From the outside it is a nondescript building in an industrial section on the Esquimalt-Victoria boundary, but inside the structure an entirely different picture emerges.

The building houses the Compassionate Resource Warehouse which serves as the local distribution centre for a humanitarian project which is acclaimed world-wide.

Medical supplies, furniture, school supplies and clothing are stacked almost to the ceiling of the 5,000-square-foot building. There is an aura of Santa's workshop as volunteers work in every section of the warehouse undertaking a myriad of tasks which will bring happiness and tears of joy to the faces of recipients.

At the centre of the hive of activity is Dell Marie Wergeland, described by one volunteer as a "human dynamo." The Warehouse is a project of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Canada. Symbolizing the spirit among the group of compassion for the less fortunate in our society is spry "92-and-a-bit," Lily Hamilton.

"I come here every Friday, rain or shine, to help sort clothing, wash donated items and sew buttons on jackets, blouses and sweaters," she said during a brief break from her work. "It's the highlight of my week," said the long-time Nazarene congregation member. "It makes me feel good to think the efforts of people in the Victoria area are helping to bring joy to so many people in Third World countries." Elaine Seibel, chairwoman of the seniors' volunteer group, said: "Lily is our inspiration. She's always so cheerful. Does everything with a smile."

The group sorts clothing into winter and summer wear as well as making necessary repairs to the items donated by various community groups and citizens in the Greater Victoria area. Mrs. Seibel, who assists with programs for seniors at the church, praised the many elderly volunteers saying: "They put their heart and soul into helping make the lives of others a little better." It is not only seniors who volunteer their time. Young people and members from Rotary clubs pitch in and help collect and package items for huge containers which are shipped to various developing countries on a regular basis.

The local project began in 1999 after Mrs. Wergeland went to Honduras in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, which wreaked havoc on the small Central American country. "It was my first trip on a relief mission. I was one of 15 people, not all from our church. There were members of other churches and the community at large."

Astounded by the devastation the hurricane had caused, Mrs. Wergeland, a nurse, worked at two clinics and assisted at refugee camps. "I used all the supplies we had brought with us. That, and our expertise, were all we could offer."

She recalled sitting down and thinking about all the items people at home throw out. "It was then that I knew we had to try and help people in these sorts of situations in a major and positive way," she said. Returning to Victoria, Mrs. Wergeland began earnestly pursuing the idea of getting the message across of the need for people to donate items for Honduras.

Her appeal brought an instant response as she was flooded with offers of help, and a steady stream of donations began arriving at a building kindly donated by a contractor. "It was a joyous occasion when the first container was shipped a few months after our appeal for donations," Mrs. Wergeland recalled.

There were items left in the warehouse after the first container was shipped. It was decided another would be packed and shipped. If enough donated items were received, said the project director. Last year, 33 containers were shipped. Twenty-one have left Canada already this year. Each container costs about \$10,000, paid for by sponsors.

"We are very unique," Mrs. Wergeland said. "Our uniqueness is that the loads we send overseas are a mixture of clothing, medical equipment, school desks, textbooks and other educational needs as well as hospital equipment. These mixed loads work well and are received very well. We get a report on each cargo received."

By the end of 2003, 60 container shipments had been sent to 28 different countries including Angola, Bolivia, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Romania, parts of the former Soviet Union, Samoa, Sudan, Tibet and Uganda as well as other eastern European countries. Veteran Nazarene congregation member, Merv Black has volunteered for more than three years and "loves every minute I spend in the warehouse."

He credits success of the venture to a "hard-driving" Mrs. Wergeland, volunteers, service clubs and the generosity of the entire community. Although parts of the building are full almost to the ceiling nothing is turned away. "We find a space for it somewhere in this clutter," Mr. Black said. "For example, a few days ago we had a call that James Bay Lodge wanted a home for 75 beds and mattresses because they were buying new ones. It was a tight fit but we found space for them. We will find a new home very quickly for these items." Connections are made with agencies and groups in Third World countries who need the items collected here.

"The aid agencies work together. We stay away from dealing one-on-one with governments because of the possibility of corruption. "

Mr. Black, one of about 80 volunteers at the warehouse, spends what spare time he has, repairing old computers so they can be included in future shipments. "One gets real joy...a deep sense of fulfillment giving of one's time to such a wonderful project." he added.

During the interview, there is a sudden rush to the warehouse driveway where an old Red Cross van has arrived. There is an eager sense of anticipation as the volunteers watch Red Cross employees Steve Bingham and Norm Trustwell open the rear door. Inside are a variety of items that volunteers eagerly carry inside. "I know where some of these items are going. I have a location picked out for some of them already," Mrs. Wergeland chortled.

People wanting to volunteer must be over 16. Anyone wanting to donate clothing, school supplies, hospital equipment, blankets, linens, textbooks or surgical supplies can contact Mrs. Wergeland at the Church of the Nazarene; Tel: 479-1733. Meanwhile, tradesmen from Greater Victoria have been in Trujillo, Honduras, recently building a new school for teenage girls.

Carpenters, electricians and bricklayers paid their own expenses and helped raise \$60,000 towards construction equipment. The project is being carried out under the umbrella of the Christian Ministries of Central America.