

FROM THE PAGES OF GOOD CITIZENSHIP

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PHOTO BY: MIRIA IOANNOU

Barbara and Ira Smith, founders of Household Goods Recycling of Massachusetts, work with 250 committed volunteers to provide more than 4,000 families a year with gently-used household furnishings.

Giving Families a New Start

Citizens Bank/Household Goods Recycling of Massachusetts

With a single act of kindness, Barbara and Ira Smith changed a tiny corner of the world.

It wasn't a magnificent gesture, just a small act of goodwill toward a Salvadorian refugee and her dislocated family. It was 1990, and the Smiths posted a simple request in a church bulletin, asking for furnishings for the refugee family. The posting brought in more household donations than anyone could imagine.

"Within a week we had everything they could possibly want and a whole lot more," says Barbara, a spry 79-year-old who lives with her husband, Ira, in Acton.

Hoping to find a home for the leftover items, Barbara went to the local housing authority to ask if anyone could use some household goods. The response was surprising. The couple's phone was soon ringing off the hook with requests for everything from refrigerators and mattresses to baby items and bureaus.

Today, 20 years later, the Smiths' solitary act of kindness has grown into Household Goods Recycling of Massachusetts, a non-profit organization that provides gently-used household furnishings to more than 4,000 families annually to help them get back on their feet.

"We didn't go looking for it," Barbara says of the non-profit venture that in April received a \$25,000 grant from Citizens' Bank and New England Cable Network after being named a "Champion in Action."

"It just started growing," notes Ira, recalling that at one point, the family's garage was bursting at the seams with so many donations, the couple had to move many of the

items into a neighbor's barn.

Six years ago, HGRM moved to its current location in a brightly-lit 9,600 square-foot warehouse at 530 Main St. in Acton, where today more than 250 volunteers work with over 300 social service agencies to provide assistance to families in more than 40 Massachusetts communities.

"We never imagined the need," says Ira, also 79 and a retired Raytheon engineer and project manager who is as passionate as his wife is about helping families that have lost everything to fires, floods, violence, or other disasters.

This year alone, HGRM expects to give out 35,000 pieces of furniture free of charge to needy families along with 13,000 boxes of smaller household items. Redistributing those donated goods, the Smiths note, not only helps struggling individuals, but also keeps tons of furniture and other household items out of the nation's landfills. What can't be used or repaired by HGRM volunteers is recycled in other ways, workers note. Worn blankets, for example, are sent to pet shelters where they are used for animal bedding while donated material goes to a sewing program for the disabled. That recycling program has helped keep nearly 100,000 furniture items out of landfills since 2004, HGRM estimates.

"Nothing stays here longer than three weeks," Sharon Martens, director of operations and one of the few paid staff members, says about the quick turnover of items that has made HGRM one of the largest providers of direct household assistance in New England.

Accompanying a visitor past kitchen chairs stacked high near a cluster of tables, many recently

repaired at an in-house workshop by a volunteer, Martens shows off an array of household items available for selection.

Washers, driers, and refrigerators share one room while nearby, scores of shiny electrical appliances and televisions, all in working order, are stacked neatly awaiting pick-up. Dishes and silverware, meticulously arranged according to the number of serving pieces, take up a smaller area near rows of bedding, all pristinely folded and labeled according to size. The decorator pieces—the pictures, tsochkes and knickknacks, the napkins, placemats, spreads, and curtains that make a house a home—are scattered throughout. Along one wall, red and green seasonal decorations mark a bright spot amid the mix of plastic bowls and children's books sitting on shelves nearby.

"Our idea is to get people set up with everything they need so they will be able to access other services," says Martens, explaining that once their home is furnished, clients can then focus on other needs, like job hunting or training.

In a small room on the other side of the warehouse, a 27-year-old mother of two picks out a pair of twin-mattress sets for her children from a sparse supply of bedding, among the most coveted items on hand.

"Without this place, I wouldn't be able to afford a lot of this stuff," says the mother, who identifies herself only as Vanessa. After spending three months in a homeless shelter with her children, she has finally found an apartment to call home. "Now, I'll be able to sit at a kitchen table with my kids and eat breakfast," says a grateful

Vanessa, who escaped an abusive relationship with little more than the clothes on her back. "And we won't have to sleep on the air mattress anymore," she adds with a smile.

Social workers like Zita Hogan, who has been coming to HGRM for years to pick out items for her clients, says that, like Vanessa, most recipients are grateful for the help they get from the agency. "It elevates their life tremendously," says Hogan. "It has a big impact on them. It gives them hope."

Yet the Smiths say even more hope is needed.

"The people in the local area have been very generous but we just can't meet all these need alone," says Ira, noting that more centers like HGRM could bring much-needed relief to struggling families, especially in these times of economic uncertainty.

Finding the right warehouse space—and paying for it—can be difficult, however.

The organization, which pays \$8,000 month for its current warehouse facility, is supported through private donations, fundraisers, and the efforts of volunteers. Yet more donations and volunteers are still needed.

"What our volunteers experience here changes their lives," Barbara says of the 250 people who already serve the organization.

It also changes the lives of others.

To be a part of that commitment and volunteer with HGRM or to donate to the organization, check out the group's website at www.hgrm.org or call 978-635-1710.

This community profile did not involve the reporting or editing staff of The Boston Globe. Editors: Spence and Sanders Communications, LLC.

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