

Pair find donating clothing a good fit

Two Hillsboro moms collect a pickup load for Play It Again, a clothes closet, and work to help find the nonprofit a new home

By JILL SMITH
THE OREGONIAN

For two years, Lorrie Pierce and Michelle Wheeler chatted each morning while waiting at the school bus stop with their children.

The Hillsboro neighbors and at-home mothers talked about their families, daily plans, small stuff.

Then in March, Wheeler asked, "How would you like to start a project with me?"

Pierce discovered the secret Wheeler: a restless, empathetic, resourceful woman who — with no knowledge of the social service community — formed a nonprofit that is trying to rescue an important resource for Washington County's low-income families.

"I was surprised. She keeps surprising me every day," said Pierce, who is helping Wheeler take over Play It Again, a Cedar Mill clothes closet run by Community Action for the past seven years. It doles out free clothes once or twice a month to as many as 300 struggling families. On Sept. 30, the store will lose its donated space.

But Wheeler and Pierce hope to have another donated space up and running by then.

It wouldn't be the first time a pair of determined but inexperienced Washington County neighbors set and met an idealistic goal.

In February 2001, at-home mother Carolyn Quatier of Beaverton asked her next-door neighbor, Melissa Balsiger, if she would like to help start a clothing outreach network for children from low-income families.

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Northwest Children's Outreach in Beaverton is now a vital part of the county's patchwork of free clothing sources, including Play It Again. For many parents, the \$5 they don't spend on pants from Goodwill can be spent on food or utilities. Some rely on Play It Again for clothes they can wear to a job interview.

Seeing poverty firsthand

Wheeler, 33, learned about poverty in the area when she volunteered in her children's classes at Imlay Elementary School in Hillsboro. She had left her job as a dental hygienist in 2000, when her multiple sclerosis began flaring up, to stay home with her children, then ages 6 and 3.

At Imlay, she saw children who didn't have good shoes or school supplies, who were ostracized because of their poor-quality clothes or kept in from recess because they didn't have coats.

"My heart hurt for them," she said, thinking of her own children, who seemed to have everything they needed. "You feel guilty."

So Wheeler, feeling strong again after taking medicine for her multiple sclerosis, decided to do something. Watching TV one day, she saw a commercial for a book called "Free Money to Change Your Life." She sent \$20 and got it in the mail.

Wheeler's idea was to get grant money and give it to the families of children at Imlay.

While thumbing through the book, she came across a section ti-

Clothes:

Assistance lets families focus on other needs

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DANA E. OLSEN/THE OREGONIAN

Michelle Wheeler uncovers the stacks of shoes, toys and housewares she is storing on the deck of her Hillsboro home until she can hand them out free to people who need them. Her garage holds more stacks. And Monday, fresh stacks filled the yard of her neighbor, Lorrie Pierce, who has been collecting leftover garage sale wares with Wheeler since late May. The two made 25 trips in one week in July. "Just as we got back from one pickup, we'd be called for a new one," said Wheeler, who has also rented a storage space.

tled "I Want to Start My Own Non-profit," which referred her to an Oregon secretary of state office Web site about nonprofit organizations.

Wheeler learned how to get corporation papers and that she needed to put together a board. She talked to her husband, Chris, to her sister, Lynnae Rhoades of Banks, and to Pierce.

"This was out of the blue for everybody," said Wheeler, who assured them, "You don't have to do anything. I'm going to do everything."

Soon after forming the Safe Harbor Foundation, Wheeler found out she needed tax-exempt status to apply for grants. She paid the \$500 filing fee and became a 501(c)3 organization in May.

By then, garage sale season was starting, and Wheeler got the idea to collect leftover wares and give them to people who needed them.

She passed out Safe Harbor business cards to people running garage sales one weekend.

"I got so many calls," she said.

After five trips to pick up items, boxes filled Wheeler's driveway, where she and Pierce worked late each night, sorting and storing.

Concrete results

After that first weekend, two things happened.

First, Pierce, 36, thought back to her own childhood and realized she wanted to be involved.

"We were poor when I was little," she said. "My family stood in

the cheese line. We went to churches for clothes."

Second, Wheeler realized she needed a place to donate her goods. She browsed the Internet and contacted Kedma Ough, a local business consultant who referred her to Community Action, the largest social service agency in Washington County.

Community Action then referred Wheeler to Play It Again, where she and Pierce dropped off a pickup load of clothes and plush toys. A week later, Wheeler called back to see whether they needed more and learned the store was losing its space.

"I thought, 'No, that can't happen.'" She talked with Jeri Alcock, director of development and community relations at Community

HOW TO HELP

The Safe Harbor Foundation is looking for at least 2,000 square feet of donated space on a bus or MAX line in Washington County. It is also looking for volunteers. To help, call Michelle Wheeler at 503-642-2194.

Lynnae Rhoades, Wheeler's sister, is running a school-supply drive for the Safe Harbor Foundation. Bring supplies to Rhoades at Providence Medical Group Family Practice at Tanasbourne, on Northwest 185th Avenue and Cornell Road. For information, call Rhoades at 503-216-9331.

Action, and set out to find a new space.

Wheeler spent a week, with help from Alcock, writing a grant application to The Oregon Community Foundation to help pay for rental, utility and insurance fees for a space. She has sent five more grant applications since then.

But she hopes a donor will step up with at least 2,000 square feet on a bus or MAX line.

"The bigger the better," Pierce said.

For Northwest Children's Outreach, that was not unthinkable. Greg Specht of Specht Properties has donated 6,000 square feet of space to the group.

It just celebrated its third year with an anniversary barbecue last week, now fills clothing orders for 30 agencies and has a mailing list of 500 people who have volunteered, donated or both.

"We had our biggest night ever and packed 125 clothing bags just a few weeks ago," Quatier said.

"If we can get some of the physical pressure off the families, then they can go on to solve their long-term problems."

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