

Retail Therapy

Volunteer runs youth home store

By Paula Grubbs

Eagle Staff Writer

ADAMS TWP — Disadvantaged youth, having arrived at Mars Home for Youth under trying circumstances with only the shirt on their backs, were for years ushered into a gloomy basement to grab a few items of donated clothing.

Shellyn Shoenthal, director of community relations at the home, told volunteer Rozanne Matthews about the issue and soon, a store was born.

"She took a project that was suffering and made it well," said Shoenthal.

The first order of business, said Matthews, was to move the clothing from the dusky administration building basement to the "store's" new location on the campus, the old carriage house. The two bedrooms of an upstairs apartment are being converted into a boys and a girls clothing store, respectively. Matthews said the rooms are about 10-by-15 feet each.

Matthews said rather than aesthetics, her first priority in the project was moving the clothes and making them easily accessible to new residents, whom the home is required to provide clothes for until they are entered into the government subsidy system.

"At least they're in bins and folded and sorted by size," she said.

Matthews spends six to eight hours per week at the store or on getting items she needs to get it up and properly running. Because the project has no budget, Matthews is trying to accomplish a huge task with no funds.

Matthews found inexpensive used clothing racks on the Internet and has solicited donated shelving from "anyone who would listen to me."

Matthews said residents at the home have taken ownership of the store, having recalled what it's like to pick out clothing in a basement during what is possibly the worst moment of a young life. On one occasion, some female residents cleaned up, sorted and folded a pile of clothing that had been scattered about.

"I know they have some pride in it," said Matthews. "That's the goal: to make it a decent space that everyone will respect and that will kind of brighten lives."

Matthews said a friend who is an interior designer will help with giving the old apartment a contemporary look for young residents. She hopes to have the new facility finished in a month.

"It's a huge project," said Matthews. "I am now overwhelmed by the Christmas donations."

Matthews began her service to Mars Home for Youth four years ago by participating in the adopt-a-kid Christmas program in which families buy gifts for residents. She then held a Lenten donation drive in her son's CCD class, which she taught.

Enthusiastic about the volunteer opportunities at Mars Home for Youth and finding herself with extra time after her boys became older, Matthews began attending Shoenthal's community relations meetings at the home. It didn't take long for Shoenthal to realize she had a dedicated volunteer.

"My first project was a benefit blues concert on September 21, 2008, at Grazi in Wexford," said Matthews.

Six female blues bands performed at the event, including her own, Matthews Band. The erstwhile lead singer said raffles and auctions held at Grazi, coupled with admission to hear the bands, raised \$3,300.

"We plan to do it again this year," said Matthews.

Shoenthal is thrilled the clothing store project has begun. Shoenthal marvels at the time Matthews spends working on the project each week because Matthews has a husband and three sons still at home.

"We don't have a staff for her and she came in and moved the store's location and continues to set it up," said Shoenthal. "She's amazing."

Matthews said she found herself at a crossroads in her life when her boys all entered high school and began driving themselves to events.

"I was faced with going back to work or volunteering," she said. "I've always had a special place in my heart for the youth home because it's kids. I think this organization is doing a lot of good."

She said her friends have stepped up their individual contributions to the home as well.

"It's nice that (the home) is in my own backyard," said Matthews. "You don't have to go downtown (to Pittsburgh) to find kids who are in need."



Rozanne Matthews, a volunteer at Mars Home for Youth, organizes clothes in the home's new store, where residents can shop for clothes. The "store," originally in the basement of an administration building, is made up of two converted bedrooms in the carriage house on campus.

JUSTIN GUIDO/BUTLER EAGLE

Mars Home for Youth

Director: Martin Harris

Number of youths: About 45

Services: Provides skilled residential services for troubled youth. Also has Longmore Academy, an alternative-education school for at-risk youth.

Phone: 724-625-3141

Web site: www.marshomeforyouth.org