



Courtesy Elaine Fournier

Open Hands - Open Heart founder/operator Elaine Fournier, left, poses with organization committee members, from left, Rita LaChance, Jodi-Marie McCarthy, JoAnn Klikier and Jackie Chaplin. The reuse center provides donated clothing for children ages 11 and younger, as well as toys and school supplies.

New home for clothing charity

Rotarians are spearheading a project to construct a building for Open Hands - Open Heart.

By DEBORAH SAYER
Staff Writer

Elaine Fournier watches construction workers erect a spacious new building on the site formerly occupied by her old rental trailer. It's a ritual she's kept daily since her unit was moved off the lot.

Fournier isn't bitter. She's counting the days until she and five volunteers can move Open Hands - Open Heart into the new 24-by-42-foot space. Fournier founded the nonprofit group in 2008 to clothe some of the area's neediest children with donated new and used items.

Governed by the Saco Food Pantry and situated on an adjacent lot, the clothing-reuse project previously was housed in the 8-by-24-foot trailer. It was cramped from the start, with Fournier neatly packing every available inch of space with clothing, toys and schools supplies. The excess, nearly 50 30-gallon plastic bins, were stored at Fournier's and other volunteers' private residences.

Enter Leo Menard of Saco, who happened upon the clothing center while dropping off donated goods for the food pantry. He was slack-jawed upon entering the trailer.

"(Fournier) had clothing stacked from floor to ceiling in that place - with just a 2-foot path to walk through," said Menard.

Menard immediately conceived a building expansion to be headed by Saco Bay Rotary

Club and the Saco-Biddeford Rotary, with auxiliary support coming from businesses and community members.

His \$196,000 project proposal included financing to install a full basement and commercial-sized washer and dryer units and funding for other upgrades to the pantry's main building to install a walk-in freezer, back-up generator, new roof, insulation, replacement windows and vinyl siding to make the two properties uniform in appearance.

To date, \$122,000 in services and in-kind donations have been received. Menard said using donated materials and volunteer labor has significantly kept costs down.

Not slated to begin until late August, with a completion date of January 2011, the project is well ahead of schedule.

"Many (trades people) made themselves available to do the work during the first week in August," Menard said. "We have already laid the foundation, framed the building, roughed in the plumbing and finished the roof. At this rate, (Fournier) will be in there in October. The sole snafu has been labor - there are more workers available to realize the project than materials to do the job."

Menard recently took out a small loan to buy materials until more money comes in.

"I can't tell people 'you can't come work because we don't have materials.'" he said.

And, getting "the goods" into the hands of those who need them most is what every aspect of this project is about. Open Hands - Open Heart was founded in honor of Fournier's sister, the late Dee Closer. A registered nurse, Closer fell on hard times and could not provide for her family. So, she signed up for services at the food pantry.

"They always treated her with dignity and respect," Fournier said. "She said she wanted to give back to them somehow when she got on her feet again."

Sadly, that day never came. Closer ended her life in 2005, leaving Fournier devastated and wondering how she could help others avoid a similar end.

"I had been volunteering at the pantry and continued to do so after she died. But I knew that there was something more that I needed to do."

Fournier discovered what that "something more" was in 2008 when she took a job as a bus driver for the Saco school system.

After seeing children board the school bus lacking proper footwear and winter clothing, Fournier got permission to place garments from the schools' lost-and-found box and other donated items in the pantry's small "miscellaneous items" area. The clothing-reuse project was an immediate hit, with items flying off the shelf.

"Sometimes, they'd take (clothing) out of my hands before I could put them down," said Fournier.

Soon, a bigger processing and storage area was needed

ABOUT THE PROJECT

THE SACO FOOD

Pantry and the Open Hands - Open Heart children's clothing reuse room are located at 67 Ocean Park Road, Saco. Donations of money, goods and services for the renovation project are appreciated and can be dropped off at the pantry from 9 to 11:30 a.m. Monday through Friday or by calling call Bob Nichols at 590-4789 or Mary Tucker at 294-7321.

INDIVIDUALS wishing to donate services or help with the construction project, may call Leo Menard at 229-7525 or e-mail lmenard@maine.rr.com.

and the trailer installed on the property.

"We outgrew the space the day we moved in," said Fournier, who is attempting to put it all into perspective as she anticipates entering a new phase of outreach.

"This building offers a new beginning for me and helps bring closure to my sister's death. I feel like I'm giving back as she would have done. I'm a strong believer that you've got to have a vision before something can happen. And, I expected this to happen. ... I just was not expecting so much, from so many and so fast."

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