

Eve Samples: Finding a second calling in the second half of life

By Eve Samples

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When you run a child care center for low-income children, needs tend to crop up often and quickly.

Broken toilets. Leaky roofs. Families without beds for their children to sleep on.

"Something breaks, I just pick up the phone and call my personal angel," said Thelma Washington, executive director of Gertrude Walden Child Care Center in East Stuart.

On the other end of the line is Frank Neff, a 68-year-old Jensen Beach resident who spent three decades selling women's apparel. He has an army of volunteers to help him respond.

Neff is the founder of Habitat Angel, a faith-based nonprofit with a refreshingly simple approach. It brings together church volunteers from different denominations to tackle large-scale projects in Martin County.

Neff doesn't care about the name of the congregation.

He doesn't care who gets credit for the work.

"What we do is to glorify God. It's not for any pat on the back, and it's a good thing, because you don't get many," Neff said with a smile.

The local churches that have signed on include Coastal Life Church, Treasure Coast Community Church, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Christ Fellowship and Treasure Coast Presbyterian. Neff is in talks with a half-dozen others.

Many churches send volunteers on missions to other countries, said Steven Hooks, president of Palm City-based Hooks Construction and a partner of Habitat Angel.

"We just figured it was time to start reaching out locally," Hooks said.

Habitat Angel's volunteers helped transform two blocks of East Stuart during a single day last March. Neff enlisted more than 300 volunteers to paint and repair homes as part of a project dubbed "Extreme Martin Makeover."

They built ramps for wheelchair-bound residents. They replaced rotting wood from the exterior of homes. They targeted every owner-occupied house on Tarpon and Bahama avenues.

"He's taking these small group efforts that used to happen, that were almost invisible, and pulling them together to go out and do really meaningful and big-impact projects," said Rob Ranieri, logistics coordinator for Keep Martin Beautiful, which participated in the East Stuart project.

Neff will be recognized for his work with Habitat Angel on Dec. 15, when he and three other Florida residents will receive Wells Fargo's "Second-Half Champions" award for tackling inspiring projects after age 50.

The other winners include a woman from Port Charlotte who founded a belly dance college and a retired engineer from Sanford who started a rock band.

Ask Neff what he thinks of the award, and he becomes a little bashful.

"It's kind of funny," he said. "I wasn't really dwelling on the fact that I'm an old guy."

He just likes to stay busy.

"There's so much to do, and so much to give," Neff said.

Already, he is thinking about next year's East Stuart project, scheduled for March 12. He hopes to bring 600 to 700 volunteers to fix 25 homes.

The group received a \$500-per-house grant to cover paint costs last time. That won't be available next year.

"We've got the labor, but we don't have the money," Neff said.

Habitat Angel has no paid staff, and therefore no overhead costs to take away from the group's mission.

That means Neff does a lot of the behind-the-scenes work himself.

When he is worn a little thin, he thinks about a passage from Galatians that keeps him going: We must not become tired of doing good.

"Sometimes we do get tired," Neff admitted.

If he is, he's not showing many signs of it.

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