

Wheels for the World



At the tender age of four, McMurray resident Anna Marie Clark demonstrated an uncommon empathy for people with disabilities, particularly people who use wheelchairs.

"A lot of people get teased because they are disabled, and it's hard for me to see them get teased," said Anna Marie, who is now 12. "I try to be a friend to everyone."

Anna Marie's empathy has since evolved into an effort to help the disabled that engages her entire family. Her mother, Linda, is Pittsburgh's representative for Wheels for the World, a national effort that provides free wheelchairs to disabled people around the globe.

The group collects donated wheelchairs and replacement parts, and the chairs are subsequently restored.

"Our goal in Pittsburgh is to save every wheelchair from the dumpster," Linda said.

"We're not picky. We'll take anything that's being thrown away," her husband, Calvin, added.

In addition to manual wheelchairs, the group collects aluminum walkers, crutches and canes. The equipment must be aluminum to ensure that it will be allowed into all of the countries served by Wheels for the World.

Since it began in May, the local Wheels for the World program has collected a total of more than 600 wheelchairs and replacement parts. This summer, Anna Marie wrote and read the script for a WORD-FM ad campaign seeking donations. That campaign raised \$24,000 and led to some equipment donations and new volunteers as well. Because it costs a mere \$150 to sponsor each chair, that funding can go far.

Wheels for the World is part of the Joni and Friends International Disability Center, which was founded by Joni Eareckson Tada. After becoming quadriplegic as the result of a diving accident, Eareckson Tada was inspired to launch a ministry tending to the needs of the disabled.

The nationwide initiative is in its 15th year. At the end of 2008, it had distributed a cumulative total of more than 52,000 wheelchairs in 102 countries. Wheelchairs are delivered to a variety of countries ranging from Honduras, Cambodia, China, Cameroon and India. Many people with disabilities who live in those nations are too poor to afford a wheelchair and are often forced to crawl to get around.

This year, the wheelchairs will be delivered to 14 different countries.

Linda Clark was familiar with Eareckson Tada's work because she had read the woman's book as a child and been active in several other aspects of the ministry. However, she first got involved in Wheels for the World when the organization reached out to her and asked her to pick up equipment in Pittsburgh because they did not yet have an outpost here.

There hadn't been anyone coordinating efforts in Pittsburgh before

Linda and her family moved back to the area two years ago. Locally, the ministry is affiliated with A Restoration Church in Peters Township.

"I'm very excited and privileged to be in this role," Linda said.

In that role, Linda coordinates a vast network of volunteers and activity.

"It's a big web of transportation and so on," she said.

The first step is finding the wheelchairs.

"They come from homes. They come from doctor's offices. They come from nursing homes," Linda said, adding that the group has even received a donation from a department store. She also noted that the group has a significant need for pediatric wheelchairs.

Linda said that the donors gain a spiritual benefit through their gifts.

"You don't have this kind of equipment without grief,"

Linda said. "Grief shared is halved and joy shared is multiplied."

"That joy is



coming back from the recipient all the way to the donor," she said.

Volunteers also scour estate sales and garage sales and Craigslist ads for the equipment.

Linda also said that Goodwill has been a major supporter of the effort. All of the Goodwill managers in the district collect and send equipment that can't be sold in their store. Every two weeks, Linda fills up her van once or twice.

After donors have been identified, the equipment must be retrieved. Sometimes that effort can be a massive undertaking. For example, 27 volunteers gathered in Meadville on one day to load a truck full of equipment.

"My husband drove the largest U-Haul you see on the road, and I don't think we could have fit another cane in there," Linda said.

The U-Haul location on Washington Road in Canonsburg has offered generous discounts to the group and volunteers provide storage spaces in their basements and garages.

As enough equipment is gathered, it is then sent for restoration. An interesting aspect of the Wheels for the World is that the rehabilitation work is performed by prisoners.

"We see it as a whole series of restoration," Linda said.

Another important piece that differentiates Wheels for the World from some similar efforts is its focus on ensuring that the chairs are appropriate for recipients.

"What's unique about what we do is that the chairs are fitted," said Calvin Clark.

The group takes physical and occupational therapists with them to perform that function. Some of those volunteers may stay in a country as long as six months.

"We're covering more complex cases," Calvin said.

Some people in the Wheels for the World network go on the distribution trips. While the Pittsburgh group is not doing the international missions currently, they look forward to doing so in the future.



Volunteers are a key component of the program and help to keep its costs down. Some 300 people touch each wheelchair throughout the entire process before it arrives at its overseas destination.

"The ways that folks volunteer are as different as our fingerprints," Linda Clark said.

People of all age groups can volunteer. Even the Clarks' six-year-old twins have pitched in.

Wheels for the World is always looking for people to add to the network in Pittsburgh, particularly people who would be able to transport and store equipment.

"If someone wanted to help, we could figure out a way to use their talents to help people."

If you are interested in getting involved with the local Wheels for the World effort, please contact Linda Clark at 724.678.7471 or lindaclark@lives-restored.org.