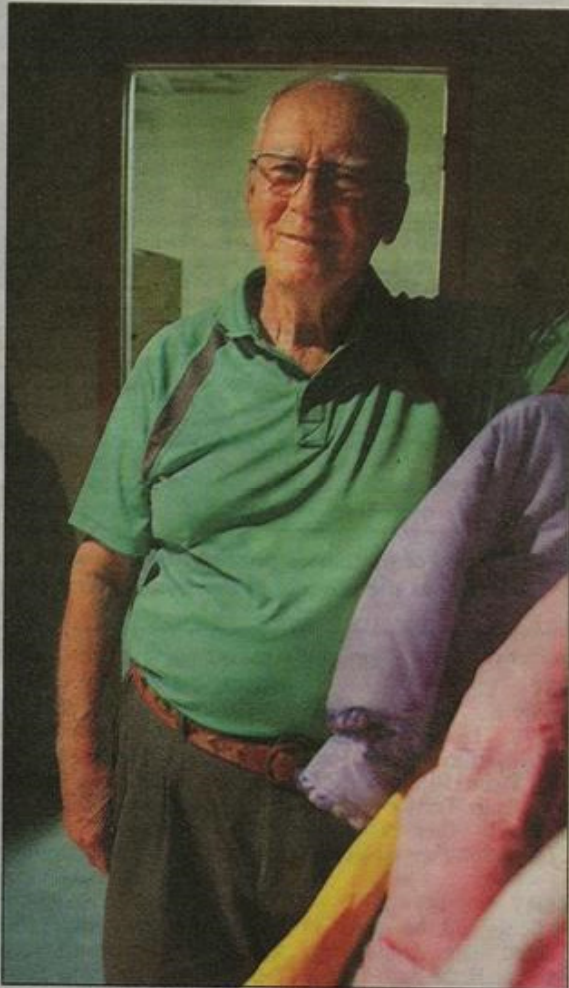


HOMETOWN HEROES



ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jim Brawley began collecting clothes out of his church 30 years ago. He now has 50 volunteers helping.

'The more you give, the more you get back'

By KAMANA SHRESTHA
STAFF WRITER

"I reached out because the Lord told me to," he says.
"The more you give, the more

The Bergen Record
July 17, 2010

Jim Brawley was born a child of the Great Depression, and his family struggled to make ends meet. But there always were people who helped, he recalls.

It was a lesson in common humanity he's been applying successfully in the 85 years since, notably including work with Mother Teresa's nuns at a battered women's shelter.

"Just working with the poor people was a real eye-opener for me — and a reminder that I have been through this, too," says the Westwood retiree.

After a career in sales, he'd suffered a heart attack in 1981 that proved an epiphany — "The Lord must have spared me for a reason," he says, and he jumped into charitable efforts like the bathroom cleaning and soup kitchen work at the shelter.

"What I learned from working with these women that dedicated their lives to helping people in need was the great need that we have to reach out to people in need," he says.

Today, those thoughts flourish in a drive he started some three decades ago, collecting bags of clothing and bringing them to St. Columba, a church in Newark.

"I didn't think I would last. I just took it one day at a time," he says. But that initial one-man operation has expanded to about 50 volunteers from his church, St. Andrew's, and more than 400,000 pounds of clothes, shoes and other items donated yearly.

Considered the grandfather of the congregation, Brawley also has been responsible for welcoming Hispanic immigrants into town since the early 1990s, arranging a Spanish Mass at the church as well as English classes. Some of them are among his volunteers now.

"The more you give, the more you get back, really."

And he notes he isn't the only one with that ideal: "Just the fact that we get 50 people to volunteer says a lot. A lot of those people need charity themselves, but they still come to give their time."

The collection bin outside of the church is emptied daily, but always refills — sometimes to overflowing, says Brawley.

He's still spry enough to drive the couple of blocks to the church daily to oversee packing donations trucked out once a month to charities and organizations.

Gently, he walks the basement hallway and says his hellos to the line of volunteers folding and packing clothes.

"I am here because I love doing it," Brawley says. "I come in and straighten things out, make up some boxes for them, put coats in the hanger, little things," he adds.

Donations cover the \$200 to \$1,500 cost of the trucks that bring the clothes to a thrift shop in Paterson and to local groups that send them to programs such as the Christian Appalachian Project in Kentucky, a North Carolina group that sends soccer shoes to Africa. Other destinations include Haiti and Croatia.

He notes that he has never had to ask for money to help pay for the charitable work's overhead.

"It just comes in," he says. "I just think people know something is being done with the money and it's worthwhile."

And as he considers his life, he is content with how it has played out.

"I am a really happy man. I have a good family. I don't have money, but I don't have problems, either."

E-mail:
shrestha@northjersey.com