

Wheels for World keeps disabled folks mobile

BY CARA PLOWMAN
STAFF WRITER
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Within the meticulous home of Dorothy Pitsch is a small, well-lit office that once was her dining room. Compared to the rest of the house, the room is somewhat cluttered with stacks of paper and files, but for Pitsch, it's just enough space for her Wheels for the World work.

WFW is a nonprofit Christian organization that collects old wheelchairs, canes and crutches from all over the United States and distributes them to people in need in more than 40 countries. A little less than half the chairs come from children who have outgrown them, the rest mostly from adults who have died or otherwise no longer need them, said Pitsch, who is the regional representative for WFW.

Pitsch-ing in

"Pitsch, a Farmington resident, has been organizing wheelchair drives in the area for three years. She works anywhere from four to 14 hours a day, depending on how many donations she receives, seven days a week.

"I actually quit a part-time job because this was getting so big," said Pitsch, 57, adding that she helps arrange drives in five other states.

In the three years she's been volunteering, Pitsch has never received a paycheck and has gone from knowing very little about organizing a wheelchair drive to teaching others how it's done.

When first asked by WFW if

she would organize a wheelchair drive for southeastern Michigan, Pitsch said, "I didn't know how to do such a thing."

So she began by sending letters to area churches asking that they post a notice. From there, donors called Pitsch at her home, and the word spread fast. Soon, she said, local media picked up on the story.

"Every step is just sort of winging it. I never know what's going to happen next," Pitsch said. "What's amazing to me is that everything just seems to fall together."

Whatever her formula may be, the wheelchair drives in the Detroit area glean large numbers of wheelchairs for WFW. A three-week drive last year brought in 3,600 chairs.

Joni

Joni and Friends, the forerunner of WFW, was founded by Joni Eareckson Tada in 1980. Tada, WFW president, was in a car accident in 1967 and was left a quadriplegic.

In Third World countries, the cost of a wheelchair equals a year's worth of wages for some. Each chair is worth around \$3,000 brand new. WFW has delivered over 8,000 wheelchairs to over 40 countries, including Poland, Peru, China, Ghana, West Africa and Romania, Pitsch said.

Joni and Friends, based in Tada's native state of California, also aims to further the Christian faith among the disabled community. Each wheelchair comes with a Bible.

Tada stays busy helping dis-

abled children realize their potential and is also the author of 27 books on topics ranging from disability to religion. Joni and Friends also teaches disability awareness in schools and churches.

"There's no end to what (Joni) does in her life," Pitsch said.

Wheels of support

Pitsch works for WFW with limited amounts of help. And since she can't pay workers, the volunteer help she does get is priceless.

DaimlerChrysler offers help by volunteering some of its trucks and drivers to take the chairs down to Nashville, where they are repaired. Shurgard Storage Centers, Inc. has been providing free units for the past few years so that Pitsch has a place to store the wheelchairs.

Once Pitsch has collected several hundred wheelchairs, volunteers from DaimlerChrysler make arrangements for the chairs to be delivered to a correctional facility in the South.

The painstaking restoration process takes place with the help of inmates from a Tennessee prison, who repair and replace broken parts and clean the chairs.

"We've had stories of inmates where they have turned their lives around (after working on the wheelchairs)," Pitsch said.

After paperwork is attached to each chair for government purposes, a tedious task in itself, according to Pitsch, they are sent around the world.

Pitsch said the best part is "hearing about children, especially (those who are able) to go to school for the first time because of the wheelchairs."

Help from friends

Her husband Ron, 65, is supportive, Pitsch said.

"When I get in a pinch, he will then help me out."

Pitsch is the mother of five children, all over the age of 18 now.

She also gets help from Jim Rapin and Sue Wong. Both assist Pitsch during the collection process.

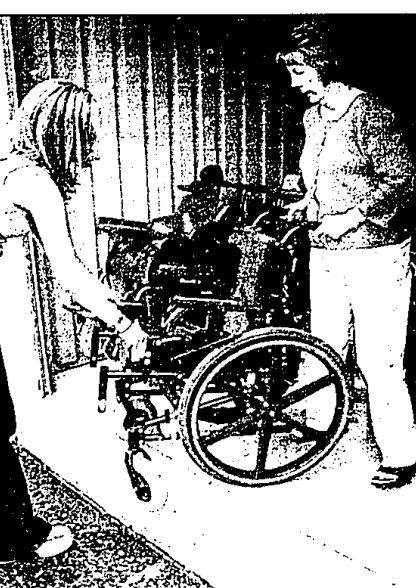
"Jim is out and about each and every day helping in whatever way he physically can. He has been a supporter and friend, helping to sow seeds of faithfulness as Michigan's Wheels For the World blossomed and grew," Pitsch wrote of her friend recently for the Joni and Friends newsletter.

Wong, Pitsch's friend and neighbor, has been volunteering with WFW for two years.

"She's a great lady," said Wong, a stay-at-home mom. "So, I'm happy to give her a hand."

Wong added that the work is very rewarding. "You find you did something good for someone less fortunate," she said, adding she plans to help for as long as she can.

Despite the long hours and no paycheck, Pitsch finds her volunteer work very fulfilling. "The



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRADLEY

Donation: Chelsie and Dorothy Pitsch load a wheelchair into a donated storage locker.

work is exhausting, sometimes, but it's definitely rewarding."

This year's Wheels for the World drive will be held Sept. 1-14. There are a number of loca-

tions where wheelchairs can be dropped off. Call Dorothy Pitsch at (248) 661-3317 to donate or volunteer. Only usable, non-electric chairs accepted.

Essay winner

Freedom isn't free

BY RADHIKA UPADHYAYA
SPECIAL WRITER

(This is the first-place winner in the essay contest sponsored by the Farmington American Legion Post 346 and the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War Commemorative Committee. Radhika is a Power Middle School eighth-grader who lives in Farmington Hills.)

Freedom is something we are lucky enough to experience on an everyday basis. It comes so naturally that we forget how blessed we are. Each day, our freedom gives us more and more opportunities to embrace life in a positive fashion. We are gifted enough to be provided with choices. Freedom is blessing that should not be taken for granted.

Each day we are allowed the chance to endure our own personal rights. Not too long ago, things were not as justified as they are today. Women were not allowed the right to vote. Religions and faiths were not voluntarily chosen. A ruler or dictator took control of everything. Today, we take for granted all that is available to us.

Our country has been through a lot to achieve freedom. Year after year, month after month, day after day, people fought for our freedom. There have been incredible massacres, unbelievable tension, and unimaginable wars. Still, our country's finest stood up when they were tired, fought when they felt defeated, and battled their hearts out. This strength came out of the loyalty to their country and their determination for freedom.

Our country has paid a price to accomplish freedom. For every boy or girl in the United States slouching on their couches, a person lost their life in a war. The cost for a single person's freedom is the death



Radhika Upadhyaya

of another. This is a completely unfair bargain. In math, we are taught to balance equations. If this equation were to be put on a scale, one side would weigh down an enormous weight. How is it balance and equality if a life must be lost to make another's better?

A blessing that is always being taken for granted is freedom. Freedom is not free. When a person thinks of freedom, what might they think of? The right to vote, the freedom of speech, the ability to choose and the list could go on forever. What people will forget are the war veterans who allowed these people to live in peace and harmony. Though we have Memorial Day as a national holiday, it just doesn't seem like enough. Veterans were our complete and absolute source of freedom, without their contributions we would be trapped in the little game of life without independence. Our lives of little restrictions and emotional security would be at a loss. Please do not take freedom for granted. Also remember that our war veterans are not ordinary Americans, they are extraordinary Americans who granted us happiness and peace.



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