

Friends help families transition out of homelessness

By ANN MIZEL

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When it came to volunteering, Tiburon residents and longtime friends Gaby Federal and Jill Kantola decided they wanted to do more than write checks — they wanted to find a way to make a direct impact on the lives of families in need throughout Marin.

The two found out about Welcoming Home and were immediately drawn to the nonprofit's mission. The organization, founded in early 2020 by San Rafael couple Marsha Roberts and Greg Hansen, works to fully furnish and equip the homes of people in Marin and Sonoma counties who are transitioning out of homelessness and poverty.

Families are referred to the organization by local social-service agencies, including North Marin Community Services, Gilead House, Homeward Bound and the Marin Housing Authority. Those families have usually been through major hardship; for instance, they may have lost their previous home in a fire or other disaster, have escaped abusive situations or fled their strife-ridden home countries.

With the help of government agencies, the families are able to obtain subsidized housing — but with no furniture



ELLIOT KARLAN / FOR THE ARK

Gaby Federal (left) and Jill Kantola of Tiburon sit among some of the household items they have collected for Welcoming Home, a nonprofit that works to fully furnish and equip the homes of people in Marin and Sonoma counties who are transitioning out of homelessness and poverty.

get involved

For more information about Welcoming Home, including how to donate or volunteer, visit welcominghome.org.

or household items and, often, no immediate means to acquire them.

That's where Welcoming Home comes in, using community donations of cash and gently used furniture and other goods to fully furnish the homes. First, a small team of volunteers visits the home, speaking with residents to learn more about their needs and preferences and taking measurements. The

organization then comes up with a detailed list of needs, specifying whether items should be new or can be gently used; that list is then sent out to donors and posted on online neighborhood forum Nextdoor.com.

Within a week, the organization drops off a starter kit — including new beds, pillows, sheets, towels and basic kitchen items — to tide residents over until "Welcoming Day," when volunteers work together to drop off and assemble items. Residents are sent out of the house for the day so they return to their newly furnished home.

Federal and Kantola have so far helped furnish the homes of two families in need, providing everything from pots and pans to tables and lamps to beds and pillows.

They've also opened their garages to help store donated items before a Welcoming Day takes place.

"I have a bigger garage than Gaby, so it gets pretty full," says Kantola. She says many donations come from "shopping" Nextdoor; often, people advertising things for sale will end up donating to Welcoming Home.

Federal says she often puts her son Billy Federal to work picking up large items.

"He has a big truck and is a big help," she says.

The most recent family Kantola and Federal sponsored was a young mother who had aged out of the foster-care system and was living in a group home with her toddler daughter. Their new apartment had only a loaner mattress on the floor, one blanket and one chair until Welcoming Home — and Federal and Kantola — came along.

"We sent out a three-page list of wants and needs to our local network asking for donations," says Federal. They also worked with a couple of local architects to draw up a floor plan so they would have the dimensions required to assess the home's needs.

"We try to create a real home," Kantola says. "We make it cozy with plants, art on the walls, throw pillows, even napkins on the table."

The most rewarding part of the day, say the friends, is hearing the families repeating things like "I can't believe this is my home."

"We get so much out of what we do just by seeing their faces," Federal says. Especially thrilled, they say, are the little kids who are often overjoyed to finally have their own bed.

Previously, Federal and Kantola worked to turn an empty apartment into a comfortable home for a dad and his son.

"We are so grateful to Gaby and Jill for their generosity and hard work helping to provide fresh starts for deserving young families," says co-founder

Roberts.

Federal and Kantola note there are several other locals who volunteer with and donate to Welcoming Home, including Amy Thimmig, Peggy Schmotter, Karen Olson, Alice Flaherty, Ellie Smith, Jeff Appleman, Suzanne Engelberg, Mary Jo Schaefer, Karen Akin, Deborah Wilton, Pam Snellgrove, Lauren Isaacson and Marilyn Goldeen.

Goldeen says Federal and Kantola's dedication to the organization is inspiring, noting the two "are setting a wonderful example of how we can all do things to help others in need in our local communities."

Their volunteer work with the organization has added another facet to the pair's 36-year friendship — and their dedication to the cause continues to grow with time.

"We do something connected with Welcoming Home just about every day," Federal says.

Contributing writer Ann Mizel is a long-time Strawberry resident and has been with The Ark since 1987.