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Good Works volunteers 'walk the walk' for the area's seniors

by Joseph Kenny, Review Staff Writer

Charzetta Frazier gives the volunteers with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's Good Works Program a thumb's up for living out their faith.

GOOD WORKS — Jacob Bax, a student at Christian Brothers College High School, helps clean up a yard in North St. Louis. Behind him is Timothy Massey, energy assistance coordinator and car donation program coordinator of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of St. Louis. In the background is Greg Marino, Good Works Program coordinator of the society. Last fall Massey's son, Tim, helped organize a group of CBC students to help and noted that 'when I heard that there was an opportunity for us to collectively make the lives of some senior citizens better, I jumped at the chance.'

"They not only talk the talk, but they walk the walk," she said.

Frazier observed the volunteers on a massive plumbing repair project at her neighbor's home and also work they did for her.

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"We are very blessed to have them," she said. Last September the society started the new program. It helps low-income seniors remain in their homes by providing them with basic home maintenance and repair.

The Good Works Program is funded by two grants, one from the Daughters of Charity Foundation of St. Louis and the other from the Citigroup Foundation. Ryan Carney, development director of the society, said he drafted the grant proposal in response to the increasing rate of injuries sustained by seniors in their homes.

Arlene and Bill Moton said they are amazed by the commitment of the volunteers. Married nearly 40 years, the couple raised four children in their home in North St. Louis. Physical limitations, including Bill's three heart attacks, have kept them from the upkeep they've needed to do on their home. Their funds are limited, with Social Security providing their only income.

An ice storm last year broke a tree limb that fell on their house. So much water seeped into the bathroom from a hole in their roof that they sometimes needed to use an umbrella in the bathroom to keep dry. Five-gallon buckets were set out to catch much of the water.

Last summer, finding themselves with windows that no longer opened, the couple called Operation Cool Down looking for a donated window air-conditioner. They were referred to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

They received the air-conditioner and much more — the ability to stay in their home in the face of mounting

Program helps seniors stay safe in homes

Approximately 29,000 seniors served by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the archdiocese live below the poverty line. As a greater percentage of the population ages, the society is providing for more seniors than ever before.

Last year, the society created a formal program to better address the needs of seniors. Since few programs provide home repair or modification, the society's Good Works Program is meeting a need by providing low-cost materials and volunteer labor to make repairs and modifications to ensure safe, secure and accessible homes for seniors.

In 2000, the National Safety Council identified falls as a leading concern for elderly. Emergency rooms saw an increase of 73 percent in injuries related to falls, the majority in the home, between 1991 and 2002.

According to the society, with a growing number of seniors preferring to remain in their homes, home repair and modifications are essential. Examples include installing handrails on both sides of

problems.

Greg Marino, program coordinator of Good Works, surveyed the house. "The yard looked like a jungle," he said.

With the help of some football players at Christian Brothers College High School, recruited by team member Timothy Massey II, "we literally went in there with machetes, cut back the jungle and carted stuff out," Marino said.

a staircase and adding bright-colored strips to the edge of each step.

Such modifications reduced the risk of falls and related injuries by about 25 percent, according to a New Jersey study.

A Home Safety Council study shows the need for grab bars in the bath or shower, proper lighting of stairs, handrails on stairs and secure rugs and mats.

Seniors who are low income and own their own homes can become clients of the Good Works Program.

To seek help from the program or to volunteer or donate, call Greg Marino at (314) 881-6015.

Laclede Gas had turned off service to the home after noticing a problem with the chimney. A volunteer pulled out the old chimney flue liner and inserted a new one so the couple would have heat for the winter.

And the hole in the roof was patched, though the ceiling still needs to be repaired. Student volunteers from Villa Duchesne recently cleaned the interior of the home.

"Without Mr. Marino and his organization, I don’t know what we would have done," said Bill Moton, who was a laborer before retiring. "I don’t think we could have stayed in this old home."

The yard is the best it has looked in years, he added, noting that the young people were hard-working. "I really appreciate all they’ve done. There’s no way we could have done this."

Others caught in a bind also have been helped. One woman lives with her grandchildren and a daughter who has been disabled since being shot about 15 years ago. The family faces "a tremendous amount of economic and other pressures," Marino said.

Normal plumbing work includes such repairs as putting in a new gasket, faucet or ballcock in the toilet. At this house, though, some of the pipes in the basement were not connected and there were no faucets in the kitchen or bathroom. The bottom of a hot-water heater was completely rusted. It took about 150 man-hours to get it fixed.

Two volunteers, George Gordon and David McDermott, donated some $4,000 worth of service on the project, Marino noted.

Gordon, who operates a company called A-1 Air, said he believes his neighborhood has been neglected, and when he saw that St. Vincent de Paul was helping seniors "I wanted to do something to help."

Even though he is a volunteer, he said, he is repaid. "I might not have been paid monetarily, but I've been blessed two or three times. The money came afterward, through other jobs. People recommended me. My workload was slow and now it has increased."

"It made me feel real good," Gordon said.

Other volunteers come from the Carpenters' District Council apprenticeship program.

Marino said one woman had a back door whose frame was rotted, and the limestone around that deteriorated to dust. "It was more like a block of wood than a door" and provided no security, he noted.

The volunteer repaired the area around the door and put in a customized frame. He and his dad worked some 20 hours on New Year's Day and then he and his boss spent another 20 hours on the project later.

Ron Tierney of the Carpenters' District Council apprenticeship program said the 2,100 students are required to have at least eight hours of community service before they graduate. Most have many more hours.

"We ask them to go out into the areas of the community where they live and give a little back to the community.

It's very fulfilling for them. They come back and, for example, say that it feels good to help an elderly lady who was needing a handrail so she could get access to her basement. We've done roofs, windows, even drafted plans and built ramps for disabled people who could not get out for dialysis."

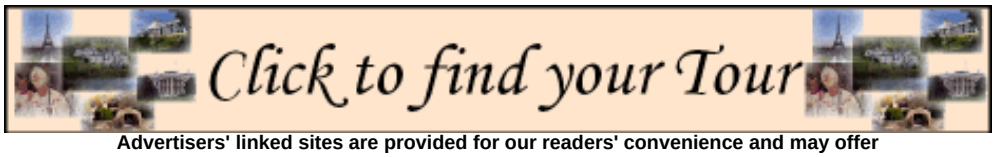
Declan Duffy, director of programs and program development for the society, said grant funds help defray the cost of materials and supplies. "To date, we've been successful in reaching out for general laborers and specialized skilled trades workers," he said.

St. Vincent de Paul conferences have been another source of support. Zip Rzeppa, executive director of the society, said the conferences are partners in the program, providing volunteers, materials and supplies, tools and financial resources. Input from the councils helps the central council serve the poor, the needy and the suffering in St. Louis, he added. A TV special in December helped enlist more volunteers and resources.

The Good Works Program recently started an initiative at St. John the Baptist Parish in South St. Louis. Working with parish nurse Sister Carol Coble, Marino devised a plan to install safety rails in the bathrooms of seniors in the parish.

Andy Wood, campus minister at CBC, said the school's LaSallian tradition encourages students to help. "People in need have so much to teach us," he said.

To recommend a senior who could benefit from the Good Works Program or to donate time or resources, call Greg Marino at (314) 881-6015 or e-mail gregm@svdpstl.org



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