

Good Works

The Art and Soul of Giving Donations

by Lisa Cavanaugh, *Family of Ellenville*

As is widely known, *Family of Ellenville* receives items donated by residents and in turn distributes them to other residents. When the process goes smoothly, it provides immense usefulness to all involved. The person who passes on articles that were at one time useful to her has a satisfaction that the item "lives on" in its usefulness for someone else. The recipient receives something needed, often of better quality than could be purchased today (at low cost).

Because *Family of Ellenville* staff work with individuals and families to address the wholeness of their situation, we know and keep track of the various items needed at any given time. To be assisted by the community in this aspect of our work provides us with the satisfaction of "things coming together."

Such is the ideal of the donation/distribution cycle. The reality uncovers many challenges. The following factors come into play. What is the quality of the item(s)? The giver may be handy at fixing or sewing, but the recipient usually is not, and staff don't have the time to fix or sew or clean. What is the quantity? A full set of dishes in lovely condition is not an asset when we already have 2 or 3 sets stored. Rotating stored with new makes sense, but we have limited trash removal. What is the type of item? Beautiful summer clothes are not helpful in the fall. Also not helpful are pot lids without the pots, coloring books already colored, single shoes, etc., and, of course, dirty or broken items.

There is often an emotional component in donating items that were once ours. The most emotional situation is when someone is donating things once belonging to a deceased loved one. So many of the items remind us of our lost loved one – things they once held, used, wore.

Things that represented what was important to him; or what she was talented at doing. *Family* always accepts what is offered to us by the bereaved donator, out of compassion and respect.

Less intense but often still strong is the "ownership" feeling, even when we have given something away. We assume or wish people would use the item in the same way we did (which we tend to think is the only way). Our things are extensions of ourselves. Being told that something of ours that we want to give to someone else is not needed, acceptable, or useful to *Family* clients is almost always shocking and often offensive. It feels like a direct rejection. Often we as staff do not see the donator (as a person with needs), we see only the box of stuff which we know from long experience will be here for a long time with no takers. Consequently the interaction may not go well with neither party feeling heard.

Since the process of donating, receiving, and then giving again is complex under the surface, we suggest that potential donators reflect upon their urge to donate when it arises. How much does the desire to donate contain the feeling of love for others? The presence of love is readily visible in the donation to *Family* as "middleman." How much does the desire to donate contain the wish to be cleared of clutter? Not everything we once owned will ever be able to be used by someone else. It is more economical to send something to the landfill than to give it to an organization that will then have to send it to the landfill. Of course it would be more economical for most of us to reduce what we buy in the first place.

As a final note, we have not mentioned what is it that we do need right now. This has been dangerous in the past when we have put out a public notice for a specific need and then have received tons of everything but. In general, think of what is useful right now or in the next month. What we especially need are hats and gloves, stovetop pots and pans, wheelchairs, and Thanksgiving basket supplies.

In closing we wish to say that we received and distributed items valued at \$36,000 in 2003, entirely due to our generous community. 



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