

LOCAL PEOPLE

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LOCAL TREASURES

A new beginning in the laundry basket

Hamilton's three Basketeers bring cheer and hope to women leaving shelters



SUZANNE BOURRET

It happens in many communities. Details vary but it goes something like this: A mother tells her children to quickly gather what they need because they are leaving their house, never to return. Dad is drunk again and passed out. They flee in their pyjamas, hurrying because he might wake up. Once away, they find refuge in a women's shelter.

More than 30 years ago, Len, then six, his mother and older sisters left their Hamilton home this way. Len's dad was an alcoholic who spent all his money on booze and abused his mother. His mother eventually sought help from women's groups that encouraged her to leave.

What remains in Len's mind to this day is that they only had a place to stay for one night — the woman who encouraged his mother to leave provided the accommodation. Len's mother was left to fend for herself with five young children. His father died in a car crash a few months later.

Len still has no idea how his mother managed with what little money she had. They moved to the East Coast when he was seven.

Women who gathered last March were in tears after they heard his story. Len, now living in Toronto, was at a meeting of the Basketeers, volunteers who



SHERYL NADLER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Women forced from their home usually take very little. Baskets with things such as a toaster or coffee maker, help women get a new start. Above from left are Basketeers Joan John, Karen Johnson and Cathie Stoddart.

support women ready to leave shelters to begin a new life.

Len and his wife had decided to donate their time to the Basketeers because it has a direct impact on their community and reflects Len's personal experience.

After she heard Len's story, Karen Johnson of Hamilton started a Hamilton chapter of the group that fills baskets for women starting all over again. She and friend, Cathie Stoddart, had been with the Halton chapter

for about three years.

"Len's story touched me so much," says Karen. "These women who are leaving or about to leave their homes because of necessity have nothing. They're doing the midnight run with the clothes on their back and without even toothbrushes."

Laundry baskets are donated by Rubbermaid Canada and filled with small appliances such as toasters, kettles and coffee makers, kitchen utensils, cleaning

supplies, sheets, toiletries, slippers, bathrobes, hats, scarves, gloves, mitts, books, tool kits, bus tokens and gift certificates for food vouchers.

Baskets can be themed for kitchen, bedroom and bath or mixed with various items. Filling a basket can start at \$50.

The average this year has been \$150 to \$200, according to Cheryl Stoneburgh of Etobicoke, who launched the project in 2000 in the Burlington and

'They're doing the midnight run with the clothes on their back and without even toothbrushes.'

— Karen Johnson

Oakville area.

The program has steadily grown with more than 1,000 volunteers and chapters in the Simcoe county region, Stratford (including London, Kitchener/Waterloo and Cambridge), the York region and the San Francisco area.

Karen and Cathie have delivered 25 baskets since last spring. Their goal for Christmas is to deliver 50 to the Good Shepherd's Martha House and Inasmuch House, part of Mission Services.

Cathie says her reward is a feeling of accomplishment that she has assisted women in starting a new life with some warmth and comfort.

Anyone can help by registering at basketeers.ca. A laundry basket will be dropped off at your home or office. The website provides a shopping list to help you fill it.

Filled baskets should be dropped off Saturday, Nov. 29, at the Salvation Army Mountain Citadel, 835 Stone Church Rd. E.

For more information, e-mail hamiltonbasketeers@gmail.com or call 905-975-6632.

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