

THE UP BEAT

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CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Brenda Huber, left, and Gislaine Hamelin have discovered The Basketeers, an Ontario volunteer group that provides daily necessities to women in shelters. Filling baskets 'is one of the greatest feelings,' says Huber.

A basketful of joy

Basketeers help women start their new lives

BY KIRSTIN ENDEMANN

Brenda Huber says it was fate that drew her attention to a newspaper story about The Basketeers, an Ontario volunteer group that provides daily necessities to women in shelters. The Ottawa woman read the story just days after a fire ripped through Cornerstone women's shelter in November 2009, taking the life of one of its residents and sending 19 others to emergency housing.

Huber and her good friend, Gislaine Hamelin, had been searching for a way to help. The Basketeers seemed the perfect fit.

Now, five months after founding the national capital region branch and three deliveries to Ottawa shelters later, the friends remain surprised at what a joyful experience it is to pack a basket.

"It was one of the greatest feelings when I handed that first basket over. It still is, and everyone says the same

thing," said Huber. "Financial donations are great, but not everyone can do that. And this is something concrete, that people feel invested in."

Hamelin and Huber often purchase the basket items themselves, searching for the best deals possible. Because not everyone can spend \$100 to \$200 to fill a basket, the two also throw parties where guests are encouraged to bring a few basket goodies.

"Shelters give what they can with limited budgets, but if we can support them in some way I think we should do it," said Huber. "And this way women get something new — basics to us but a bonus to them."

Finished baskets are given to the participating shelters and they distribute them to women in need. The shelters sign agreements not to break up the baskets' contents and the donors remain anonymous.

Many baskets are donated to shelter residents, others go to women who are moving out to their own apartments.

Anyone interested in becoming a "basketeer" is given a donated Rubbermaid white laundry basket, and

a theme — the most popular are kitchen and bath. Baskets could contain a toaster, towels, oven mitts, cleaners, a hair dryer, shower curtain, sanitary products — the sort of things we would buy ourselves if restocking from scratch, said Huber.

The baskets are then picked up by branch organizers, wrapped in garbage bags ("more useful than cellophane") — tied with ribbon and delivered.

Along with basic necessities, Huber said they often find "basketeers" have tucked in little treats like books, manicure sets, chocolates or bubble bath.

"Everyone is very, very generous and thoughtful, and very invested in their gift-giving — and that is what it is, a gift," said Huber.

The group wants to put together 10 baskets for Interval House (intervalhouseottawa.org) before Mother's Day on May 9.

Anyone interested in making a basket — or donating goods to go in baskets — should contact the group by e-mail at ottawabasketeers@gmail.com. For more information, see www.basketeers.ca.