

Lawyers Give Time, Clothing to Homeless

*Charity Group Uses
Old Woodie's Store
For a Good Cause*

By SYLVIA MORENO
Washington Post Staff Writer

Long gone are those must-see holiday window displays of muffler-clad marionettes and toy train sets, Santa Claus and a snowy North Pole. No more garland-draped columns or shiny, sparkly ornaments or that soft vanilla scent that wafted over dark oak counters.

But yesterday, inside the former Woodward & Lothrop flagship store in downtown Washington, there was a little bit of Christmas going on.

The venerable Woodie's, now an empty cavern of exposed electrical wiring and scuffed marble floors, was filled with clothes and people once again. This time it was for charity: the lawyer-driven project called Gifts for the Homeless.

"It breaks my heart to see the store this way," said Geri Walsh, a lawyer with the Securities and Exchange Commission who bought her first couch and chair at Woodie's upon moving to the area in 1989. "But I'm glad we can use it for something like this," she said.

Gifts for the Homeless (GFTH) collected, sorted and distributed tens of thousands of pounds of clothing, shoes and toys for the homeless, all in one weekend. By the end of today, the organization will have distributed 1,900 extra-large plastic trash bags full of items to 46 area organizations that work with the homeless, including 19 shelters, transitional housing groups, health clinics, hospitals and soup kitchens.

GFTH was created 14 years ago when three law firms banded together to raise money among their employees to buy new clothes for the homeless, said Jim Villa, a lawyer with the Justice Department's antitrust division. To extend the reach of the project, the used-clothing drive was started in 1989. Today, employees of 90 law firms and other legal organizations contribute to the drive with clothes and money.

New items and any formal clothing that are donated—yesterday that included a pair of never-worn black alligator Salvatore Ferragamo pumps and a used tuxedo with matching black patent opera shoes—get sold to local consignment shops to raise money.

That money, said Walsh, vice president of purchasing for GFTH, is used to buy such clothing as long underwear, gloves, hats, socks and blankets for shelters to distribute.

By year's end, GFTH will have distributed an estimated \$1 million in items to the homeless since its inception in 1986, said GFTH spokesman Laurence Williams, a lawyer in the Internal Revenue Service chief counsel's office.

Villa said there are no overhead or administrative costs. All items are donated. Volunteers sort and bag the clothing and toys. Private vehicles distribute most of the bags of items. Various law firms donate the cost of a U-Haul truck,



PHOTOS BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Amy Wester, 7, sorts clothing for the Gifts for the Homeless project in the old Woodward & Lothrop building.



Gifts for the Homeless began 14 years ago when law firms raised money to buy clothes for the homeless.

the bags, and the coffee and doughnuts and pizza and soft drinks for volunteers this weekend.

Douglas Jemal of Douglas Development Corp. donated the vacant Woodie's to Gifts for the Homeless for use as a makeshift warehouse.

The store worked well for the project, said GFTH President Carol Weiser, who is a partner in Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan. In years past, she said, the group has used donated office space, with its hard-to-manuever individual cubicles.

The wide-open space of Woodie's allowed the volunteers to spread out clothes easily by category ("Boys Sweatshirts," "Women's Summer" "Mens Casual Shirts") before they were bagged and hauled to the loading dock.

The lighting was dim and there was no heat, but volunteers just

bundled up in their coats as they worked.

John Wester of the law firm Sidley & Austin made a family outing of the bag-and-sort at Woodie's. He and his wife, Sharon, and their three children, Lauren, 12; Zach, 10; and Amy, 7, came from Fairfax to work a few hours. They had contributed items in the past, but never volunteered their time to GFTH.

"This was our first year to do this," John Wester said. "We thought it would be good for the kids—and for us, too."

His son, Zach, agreed.

"When I was, like, 8 years old, I thought that when I got older I would give half my money to charity," said the fifth-grader at Canterbury Woods Elementary School in Annandale. "So now I know I won't be able to do that and be able to support my family. But I know there's other ways to help the homeless and this is one of them."