



Donna and Jim Piscopo help families in transition find stability by furnishing their home.

“Our goal is to ease the transitioning burden, thereby strengthening family functioning and providing a more stable home environment.”

— Jim Piscopo

Driven by a Higher Power

Camelback couple takes a leap of faith to help others rebuild their lives

Last year, Donna and Jim Piscopo started a bank and built a bridge. Neither is a financier nor an engineer, mind you; but they are in the business of working small miracles.

Their idea of matching resources with the needs of the community’s economically disadvantaged spawned the development of Bridging AZ Furniture Bank Inc., the first and only organization of its kind in Arizona. The Piscopos work with social service agencies to distribute quality donated furniture to those in need.

To receive furniture, individuals must be enrolled in a case management or support program with one of Bridging AZ’s partnering agencies. Qualifying families may accompany their caseworker to select their own furnishings from the Piscopos’ storage area—currently ten 10-foot by 10-foot rented storage units.

“Bridging AZ focuses on furnishing a home with the

basic necessities,” Jim says. “Our goal is to ease the transitioning burden, thereby strengthening family functioning and providing a more stable home environment.”

TRUE SACRIFICE

To be sure, starting and running a viable nonprofit is an admirable goal, but few people are actually willing to make the sacrifices necessary for such an endeavor to succeed. It was a four-year-long “Education for Ministry” program at their Paradise Valley church, St. Barnabas on the Desert, that inspired the Piscopos to take on the challenge.

Reverend Mark VanWassenhove, Church rector and Bank board member, who has helped direct agencies serving homeless people in downtown Phoenix for almost 20 years, points out that the Piscopos have taken great personal risks to meet an enormous need in the

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The Piscopos sold their home and used their life savings to start and support Bridging AZ Furniture Bank.

community. “After they finished the classes, Jim and Donna were ready to actually go out and live their faith,” he says.

The effort began as a side hobby of sorts, but soon the couple realized that a part-time commitment would not be enough, says Paradise Valley resident, St. Barnabas member and Bridging AZ donor Phyllis Rector. “The Church gave them some seed money to begin the project, but the real sacrifice has been their own,” Rector says.

Jim quit his job. The couple sold their home at the foot of Camelback Mountain, liquidated assets, and took on a sizable debt to prepare for their mission.

So why would they take on such financial risk in the prime of their lives?

Jay Hornbacher, retired director of Outreach Ministries at St. Barnabas, says the answer is entrenched in their faith. “They are living sacrificially like the Scriptures call us to do,” he says. “It’s easy to give, but not so easy to give up—what Jim and Donna have done.”

GOOD FAITH

Hornbacher recalls the fateful day Jim walked into his office. “Jim asked me what he could do to make a difference in the lives of the homeless in our community,” he says. “I had just returned from a visit to my brother in Minneapolis who volunteers with a bridging program there and was looking at the pamphlet on my desk when

he came in. The Lord was definitely at work.”

In June 2004, the Piscopos established a board of directors and the Bank as a nonprofit. Since then, they have helped 67 families, including 92 adults and 200 children.

“The cost to the individual is nothing,” Jim says. “Only the agency that represents them pays a nominal fee of \$80. Families fill out a ‘wish list’ and choose from what’s available at the time of their visit with their caseworker. The average family receives \$1,500 worth of furniture.”

The Piscopos are currently attempting to close escrow on a warehouse in Mesa to house the donated furniture. They are looking to corporate sponsors, additional nonprofit agencies, local churches and volunteers to help them service the tremendous need that exists in the community. For 10 hours a day, seven days a week, they work feverishly, taking calls from as far away as Pinal County for donations.

If you’re wondering why a couple in their early to mid-40s would trade their comfortable lives for an uncertain future, the explanation is simple, Jim says. “We are doing this because we can.”

Former East Valley Catholic Social Service director Ellie Gersten, a Bridging AZ board member from Tempe, looks at their efforts as nothing short of miraculous. “Jim and Donna are a very unique, entrepreneurial couple,” she says. “They are able to create ways of doing things that don’t happen in other places. It’s no small miracle.”

Who’s Eligible?

Those receiving services and qualified from a partnering agency among the following groups:

- Previously homeless
- Battered women, men and children
- A person who needs the service due to the effects of a chronic, life-threatening disease
- Anyone enrolled in a program offered by a government agency

How to Help

Bridging AZ Furniture Bank Inc. needs the following items: beds, sofas, dressers, desks, tables, chairs, lamps, bed frames, mattresses and box springs, dishes, bed linens and blankets, pillows, towels, cookware and silverware. Current special need: kitchen tables and chairs. The agency does not accept major appliances, computers, baby furniture, car seats, broken or soiled furniture, clothing or office equipment. Cash donations are also accepted and are tax deductible. Volunteers are needed to answer phones, sort, drive a truck or pick up and move furniture.

For more information or if you wish to volunteer, contact Jim Piscopo at (480) 375-5454 or email info@bridgingaz.org.

Do you know of a philanthropic organization or dedicated volunteer whose story is worth sharing? Tell us about it at Camelback@pni.com