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RAPID FIRE

LEGIONNAIRES IN ACTION

A PLACE AND A TABLE

Arizona Legionnaire pours all he has into a furniture bank for homeless veterans.

BY KEN OLSEN

Richard Coffee was surprised to find a bed, couch and TV in the apartment that a Phoenix homeless coalition lined up for him last year.

“The place is gorgeous,” the 53-year-old Army veteran says. A lot of veterans who get VA-subsidized housing “move into a place and it’s empty. No furniture. Nothing.”

Coffee ended up on the streets after the recession cost him his mechanic job in 2008. A recovering alcoholic, he had been living in a shelter for a year when a housing program call Project J3 VETS found him a place to stay. Things as simple as a table, chairs and shower curtain are critical to keeping veterans like him in their apartments.

It’s the difference between housing them and having them walk,” says Shane Groen, special initiatives manager with the Arizona Coalition to End Homelessness, which runs Project H3 VETS. “Without furniture, these guys sit on a blanket on the floor. It’s isolating and lonely, and they want to go back to the shelter.” Or the streets.

Coffee and more than 100 other homeless veterans are living in furnished places thanks to Legionnaire Jim Piscopo and his wife, Donna, who started the Bridging AZ Furniture Bank to help families moving out of shelters.

Jim, who belongs to Post 44 in Scottsdale, gave up a successful business to start the furniture bank.



Jim and Donna Piscopo sold their home and borrowed from friends to fund their furniture bank for homeless veterans.

“It was a really hard decision,” he says. “But this needed to be done.”

A native of Detroit, Jim started a contracting business in the Phoenix area when he left the Air Force in 1985. Ten years ago, Jim gave up contracting and the couple sold their home to help fund the furniture bank.

A few months later, the Piscopos visited a Minnesota furniture bank for pointer, and launched Bridging AZ in 2004. For a while they operated out of storage units, but soon they needed a warehouse where donated furniture could be cleaned, repaired and displayed. Banks wouldn’t finance the purchase, so they used money from the sale of their home and borrowed from friends to make a down payment.

Over the past decade, Bridging AZ has distributed more than 200,000 items worth an estimated \$5.2 million. Half the recipients are veterans, and half are other people in need. Bridging AZ charges either \$5. or \$10. for large pieces of furniture. “It doesn’t matter too much to our bottom line,” Jim says of the fee. “It matters to the clients. In the past, what they got was charity. Now they are buying it. They own it and they value it.”

Before the economy soured, he had seven employees. The entire staff now consists of Jim and Donna, and an employee who picks up, cleans and repairs furniture. They fill in the gaps with college interns and volunteers. And they work long hours including emptying out a hotel and unloading two semitrailers of donated mattresses that showed up on short notice.

The future is rocky. Bridging AZ needs to raise \$100,000 to keep operating, replace its fleet of three worn out truck, and hire a fundraiser and an operations manager. Until the Piscopos figure out a way to make that happen, Jim says their optimism keeps them going. “We’ve done so much with so little for so long, we can now do anything with nothing and still look good doing it.”

Ken Olsen is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine