

Pair live on faith of good works

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From most points of view, Jim and Donna Piscopo are, well, ummm, what's a nice way to say this?

They're CRAZY.

Just a few years ago, they were living what most of us would call the good life. Steady jobs working for themselves. Decent income allowing them to pretty much do as they wished. Nice Scottsdale condo right there at the base of Camelback Mountain. They had just about anything a couple could want. Except, as it turns out, a purpose. A challenge.

That began to change one day in 2003 when Jim, while volunteering at a domestic-violence shelter, noticed a caseworker jamming an old couch into a closet. While most of us would have viewed it as a piece of furniture that had seen better days, the caseworker saw it as a piece of furniture that would help a fragile family find better days.

So Jim got himself a 10- by 10-foot storage shed and started collecting furniture for the women and children who would one day leave that shelter and begin again. The furniture came easily, from yard sales, friends and even strangers as word got around.

But Jim and Donna knew that they could do more, if only they had the time and the resources. So they quit their jobs, sold their condo and opened the state's first and only furniture bank, Bridging AZ Furniture Bank. They hit up friends for help and their church, St. Barnabas on the Desert in Paradise Valley.

That 10 by 10 storage shed grew to 10 - 10 by 20 storage sheds and later into a former meat locker in Mesa that they would transform into an 8,000-square-foot furniture warehouse.

These days, Jim and Donna's non-profit works with 30 social-service agencies, providing furniture to people who have been homeless or fled abuse, to families who are struggling to stay together. In their four years of operation, the Scottsdale couple have helped more than 500 families begin again.

One, a mother who lived in a van in the river bottom with her 4-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son. Another, a young couple who had hit on hard times and made the painful decision to turn their children over to Child Protective Services for safekeeping while they worked to get back on their feet. The father got a couple of jobs and the mother went back to school and eventually they were able to afford an apartment again. The furniture from Jim and Donna - beds, chairs, a kitchen table - allowed them to bring their children home.

"I think what the furniture bank might do," said Suzanne Schunk, director of family support services at Southwest Human Development, "is help turn a house into a home for children."

Is there a higher calling in Arizona, where so many children have so little?

Jim and Donna were recently recognized by the Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce for their charitable efforts. More important than any award, however, is the quiet recognition that you've helped a family create a home. Or, in the case of Jim and Donna, that you've helped five to six families a week create a home.

Their goal is to help 10 a week next year. That is 500 families. To do that, they will need plenty of help in way of donations and workers.

These days, the couple live in south Scottsdale and have five mortgages - one on their home and four on their warehouse. They shrug when you ask them why they would willingly leave a life of security for one where it's a struggle to get by.

It is, they simply say, a leap of faith.

"This is what I want to do," Jim says. "If we're going to say we have faith, let's display it."

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You can help

More information: Bridging AZ Furniture Bank, bridgingaz.org or call 480-833-3997.

Making a contribution: Send to Bridging AZ Furniture Bank, 25 N. Extension, Mesa, AZ 85201.