

HELPING HANDS

'We're all working for the same cause'

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Halloween Party & Coat Drive Friday at Owenego

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Throughout Friday night, Oct. 26, at Branford's Owenego Inn, a pile of new and gently used coats will grow into a mountain. The coats will come from the closets of those attending the Sin Sisters Halloween Party & Coat Drive and their generosity hasn't wavered for the last five years.

More likely than not, they're moved by the same impulse that has Shoreline individuals phoning the BHcare Clothing Bank from time to time. What do you need? they'll ask Joan McFarlane-Nwagboli, clothing coordinator of the lively, often hectic, space adjoining the Community Dining Room on Harrison Avenue.

"And then they buy coats or gloves or sleeping bags for people sleeping on the Green or on the grounds of one of the churches or in the woods," said the charismatic Branford



Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

Branford resident Joan McFarlane-Nwagboli, coordinator at BHCare Clothing Bank in Branford, right, with volunteers Anita Ruggiero, left, and Robin Thomson.

resident, who's been the face of the Clothing Bank since the 1990s, when it operated out of two trailers in the parking lot

of the former Branford police station.

Back then, conditions were primitive. "There was one

light bulb hanging down," she recalled on a recent morning, among the well-stocked racks of women's dresses and men's

shirts, boxes of personal care items, and stacks of blankets and sheets, as strains of Adele filtered through the spacious, brightly lit room. Without a functioning bathroom, "we'd go to the library or run home." On sweltering days, "we'd sit in our cars to cool off."

The space that opened in 2001 in what would become the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Building has been a "godsend," as she put it. With its proximity to the dining room, longtime volunteers like Anita Ruggiero get to know what anyone who comes in for a hot meal might need.

"When we get that sleeping bag, I know who to give it to," she said.

Ruggiero, who owned and operated a clothing store in Hamden, also helps clients put outfits together. When a pair of shoes comes in — sturdy boots, say, or an almost-new pair of Nike sneakers — she knows who might need them and how to discreetly approach the person in the dining room to confirm the size.

Who donated the shoes is unknown. That's the point. They're all around us, these

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quiet philanthropists.

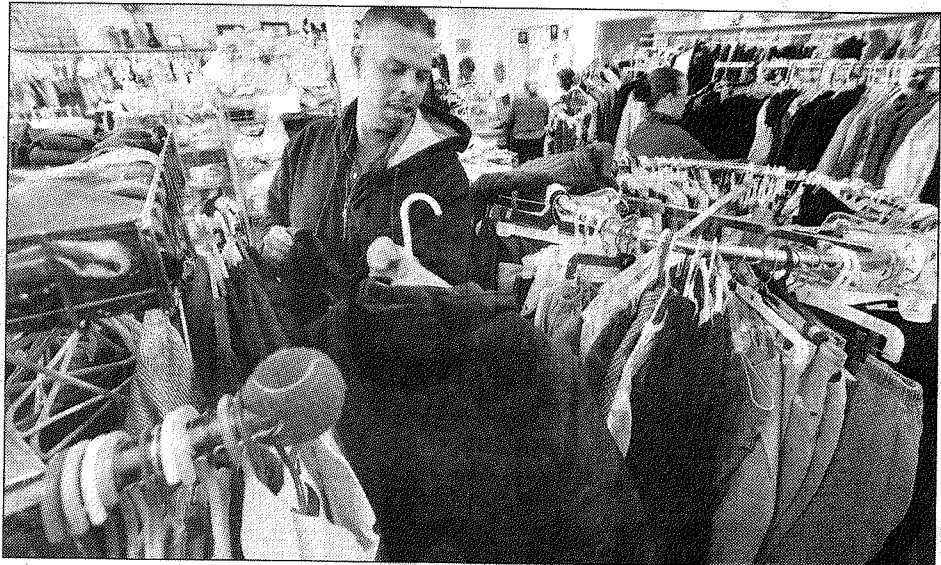
They are the Guilford consignment shops Hole in the Wall and Cinderella's Attic and Blackstone Homemakers Group in Branford. And the Calvin Klein store in Clinton. They are the service volunteers from Yale School of Organization and Management, as well as students at Branford High School and those at Walsh Intermediate School led by teachers Mattie Boyle and Peter Frye, as well as those from Sliney and Tisko elementary schools, and the Branford Lions Club with their monetary support.

"All of them help to keep it going," said McFarlane-Nwagboli, of the program that serves roughly 3,000 people throughout the state that annually visit the Clothing Bank. Paying \$20 a year, a shopper can come in twice a month and get seven pieces of assorted clothing each time.

Those pieces come from donations. "Everything is donated," said the 55-year-old mother of 10 and veritable Wonder Woman, who also works four days a week as a certified nursing assistant at Connecticut Hospice, in addition to providing supportive living service at Marrakech, Inc., a disability services organization.

Each weekday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., the native Jamaican with the booming laugh is tasking her army of 25 volunteers, which includes McFarlane-Nwagboli's mother Mavis Edwards, her husband, the Rev. Joey Nwagboli of Evergreen Ministries in Hamden, as well as her kids.

There's also Maria Soriano, Cindy George and Jane Holzman accepting and sorting donations, organizing clothes by size and style, and putting them on hangers. And Karen Ferraro, Billy Ferraro and



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Jose Santini, of New Haven, picks out clothes at BHCare Clothing Bank in Branford.

Phyllis Stackpole folding bedding, arranging shoes and assisting shoppers. And Maryetta Russell, Patricia Adcock, and Robin Thompson rotating seasonal items, providing tax write-off forms for donors, and washing and drying laundry.

That goes to a policy McFarlane-Nwagboli has followed from the beginning. "We don't want to insult any of our people with dirty or worn-out clothes," she said, as a young mother browsed the newborn section for baby clothes. "I want our people to find beautiful things that make them feel good inside."

Especially, she added, for a prom or a wedding or even a job interview. "For these events we want our people feeling confident and proud. We want the clothes to uplift their spirit."

As winter approaches, the emphasis shifts to warm coats. "There's a whole population that's really struggling, and we try to do whatever we can do to help them through," said Branford's Dru Dodd.

Dodd is among those who oversee Trinity Episcopal

Church's Trinity Closet, which provides coats, clothes, shoes, linens, pillows, as well as household and personal items, twice a year to their neighbors in need.

Wherever people choose to donate doesn't matter, according to Peter Cimino, executive director of the Branford Counseling Center, who directed Community Services at BHcare until 2013.

"We all work together to get the help to the people who need it. We're all working for the same cause."

That's true of those who year after year bring coats to the Sin Sisters Halloween party at the Owenego, and the businesses, organizations, churches, and schools and volunteers at the BHcare Clothing Bank, as well as driver Brian McCabe, who will pick up donations up and down the Shoreline, and Rose DeJager, 95, who sews buttons and zippers on clothes for the Clothing Bank.

CDR Executive Director Judy Barron elegantly summed it up. "There are just a lot of wonderful people in this area quietly pitching in to help those in need," she said.

"It never fails to take my breath away."

▶▶ BHcare Clothing Bank is in the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Building, 30 Harrison Ave. Clothing Bank hours: Monday through Thursday from 9:30 a.m. to noon and 1 to 2 p.m.; Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Saturday 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Volunteers welcome. For information and for pickups, call 203-483-2643. To learn more about BHcare, visit BHcare.org.

▶▶ To donate to the spring Trinity's Closet, bring items to the church office daily between 9 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. at 1109 E. Main St., Branford. Items needed most: household cleaning supplies, shampoo, toothpaste, paper goods, new pillows, and new or gently used spring and summer clothing.

▶▶ The Sin Sisters Halloween Bash & Coat Drive is from 7:30 p.m. to midnight on Friday, Oct. 26 at the Owenego Beach Club, 40 Linden Ave. Branford. Tickets \$20 (cash) at door include appetizers, Halloween treats and cash bar. Donation of new or gently used coats is encouraged.