



Equipped to Help

Washington Knights lend free medical equipment to thousands in need

by Jean Parietti

It's a sunny spring day, the kind that draws Seattle residents outdoors to walk, bike and kayak. For 27-year-old Tiana, though, getting outside her small apartment to enjoy life in the city — or even go grocery shopping — isn't easy.

Born with a foot disability, Tiana had multiple surgeries as a child, with mixed success. Despite braces prescribed more recently by her podiatrist, pain in her feet and knees has sometimes kept her homebound for days.

Last year, Tiana finally told her doctor, "I just can't stand being inside anymore."

He suggested a nonprofit might be able to help her obtain a wheelchair. But after her insurance company had denied her twice, Tiana did not have much hope.

"I was super depressed. I was crying," she recalled. "I called them, not expecting anything."

Larry Devlin, a member of Seattle Council 676 and program director for KC HELP in Poulsbo, responded to the call. KC HELP — the Knights Community Hospital Equipment Lend Program — lends durable medical equipment at no cost

to anyone in need. Councils in Idaho, Arkansas, Nebraska and elsewhere have organized similar programs, but KC HELP is notable for its longevity and scale: Several large distribution centers are run by Knights of Columbus across Washington state.

To Tiana's amazement, Devlin brought her a motorized wheelchair, in time for her to attend a popular community festival. He also provided a hospital bed, special mattress and shower chair not covered by her insurance.

"Larry's been a real lifesaver," Tiana said. "I still have my struggles, but he's definitely made certain aspects so much easier."

For Jerry Rhoads, who founded the first KC HELP program in the Tri-Cities area of Central Washington, helping people like Tiana is what has sustained him through nearly 23 years of hard work leading Knights in serving more than 52,000 people.

"That's the heart of our ministry," Rhoads said. "It's not how many pieces of equipment we put out. It's the souls we touch as we do it."



Knights repair medical equipment and assist clients at the KC HELP warehouse in Pasco, Wash. KC HELP, a program to lend free wheelchairs, walkers, hospital beds and other equipment to anyone in need, was founded by Jerry Rhoads (far left and far right), a member of Richland Council 3307.

A STRONG FOUNDATION

Rhoads conceived the idea for KC HELP in 1996, when he and other members of Richland (Wash.) Council 3307 were volunteering with a hospice organization. As they set up medical equipment for patients, they discovered people who didn't qualify for hospice and had unmet needs. The council members got permission from their grand knight to begin a pilot program, and Rhoads, then an engineering manager working on a master's degree, made the program his thesis project.

Initial research revealed that the need was so great that all the councils in the Tri-Cities area should be involved. Kennewick Council 8179, Holy Spirit Council 10653 and Pasco Council 1620 quickly joined the team. A brochure explaining KC HELP was created and distributed to home care organizations, health care professionals and senior centers. As word spread, requests for assistance came in, as did donated equipment. Altogether, about 150 people were served during the pilot year. State officers recognized it as the community service program of the year in 1997 and recommended it be spread to other councils.

As it expanded, the program outgrew the mini-storage units where it first stored donated equipment. Now, Rhoads runs a 5,300-square-foot warehouse in Pasco with about 40 volunteers and just one paid position. The well-organized facility includes work stations where Knights clean, sterilize, repair and distribute the equipment.

"It reminds me of Santa Claus with his elves working," said Pat Kenny, a past grand knight of Kennewick (Wash.) Council 8179. "You've got all these guys in there with their tools. They're just busy."

Every Tuesday and Thursday, the Pasco warehouse opens its doors to anyone who needs help.

"It is something to experience — just talking to the people when they come in and hearing their stories," Rhoads said.

According to Rhoads, it's not uncommon for people to say, "We've been everywhere trying to find a wheelchair, and I need one desperately."

When they realize they will be helped by the Knights, he said, "They're pretty much in tears."

Rhoads deflects credit for creating the program. "I think God founded this program," he said. "He asked me to drive the bus, and he stacked it with all-stars."

'SMALL THINGS WITH GREAT LOVE'

Kenny, 75, has been on both sides of KC HELP. As a volunteer, he helped deliver bulky hospital beds and other equipment. "I can remember rainy nights and trying to squeeze through apartment complexes," he said.

A retired Marine pilot, Kenny was exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, and he later needed open-heart surgery in 2011. When he came home from the hospital, he learned that his friend Jerry Rhoads was one step ahead of him.

"He had already set up the hospital bed and everything for me in my house," Kenny said.

Today, Kenny is able to walk short distances, getting around with a special upright walker that his insurance wouldn't cover but the program provided.

"I became a recipient of all that KC HELP does," he said.

One client who particularly touched Rhoads was a girl named Allison, who was 9 when she first visited KC HELP. She had a cancerous blood disorder that affected her limbs, and she could barely stand. Allison spotted a wheelchair with yellow arms and got to take it home. Over the next several



Members of San Raphael Archangel Council 13165 in Houston deliver wheelchairs and a walker to members of their parish. Council 13165 began its equipment loan program through a connection with the Washington state councils. • Tiana, left, was homebound until the KC HELP program in Poulsbo, Wash., provided her with a motorized wheelchair. Larry Devlin, right, directs the Poulsbo program.

years, she returned whenever she outgrew her wheelchair and needed a larger one.

The last time the volunteers saw Allison, her left leg had been amputated and it looked like she was going to lose her other leg. When Rhoads recently called her parents to check in, he learned that she had died.

“She was such a wonderful little gal,” he said. “She was just as sweet as you could imagine. Though a poignant experience, we were blessed to be able to walk with her in some small way that bought her joy.”

Citing KC HELP’s patron, St. Teresa of Calcutta, Rhoads added that we are not called to do great things, but “small things with great love.”

RESTORING FAITH IN HUMANITY

The life-changing work of KC HELP has spread far beyond the Tri-Cities.

Mike McGlone led the Knights in Wenatchee Council 1545, about 125 miles northwest, in starting a KC HELP site in 1998; they now operate out of a 2,000-square-foot facility.

Larry Devlin, who was once a volunteer in the Tri-Cities program, relocated to Houston for work.

As a district deputy, he helped reactivate San Raphael Archangel Council 13165 and encouraged council members to launch an independent medical equipment program in 2015.

The Houston program is small, but every Sunday afternoon, Knights are available to accept donations and distribute equipment, mostly walkers and wheelchairs.

“It just goes back to faith in action,” Grand Knight Francisco

Carpenteyro said. “I really get excited to help anyone in need.”

When Devlin moved back to Washington in 2016, he started the KC HELP branch in Poulsbo, across the Puget Sound from Seattle, with a trailer of equipment from the Tri-Cities. Devlin, now a K of C field agent for the Seattle area, has also solicited help from several local councils to purchase electric wheelchair batteries, which can be costly.

A new outreach to San Felipe, a small city on the Baja California peninsula of Mexico, has also been launched with a Knight from Mexico, Mario Gamboa. KC HELP first sent medical equipment and supplies there last fall and a second trailer arrived May 7. Most recently, Colville Council 12273, northwest of Spokane, decided to begin a pilot program of KC HELP this summer, Rhoads said.

“This program changes the heart,” Rhoads said, “and it also changes the community’s awareness of the Knights of Columbus.”

Devlin agreed. “This is a way to showcase the Knights and the work that we do,” he said. “You can really feel like you’re making a difference in somebody’s life. You can’t imagine the kind of hardships they go through.”

For people like Tiana in Seattle, KC HELP has been a godsend.

“I’ve never been in contact with people who were so genuinely caring,” she said. “It’s just restored my faith in humanity. This is proof to me how God works.”♦

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