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A Place To Turn

Fisherman's Mark has long offered its support to area individuals and families in troubled times.

By Leta Brehme, staff writer

At this time of year, a time of giving and sharing, our thoughts often turn towards the less fortunate members of our community. We visit the local libraries, schools and businesses, and pull brightly colored paper angels off of plastic trees. We read these Christmas wishes of innocent children and for a moment in time we open our hearts and our wallets and grant them. With this act we become Santa for some nameless child, and we feel a smile spread across our face.

Fisherman's Mark opens its heart year round to families in need. This remarkable institution is a social service organization located in Lambertville, N.J. In the late 1890's The Reverend Elvin K. Smith had a dream. He wanted to create a place for the whole community to gather together. His vision is the center of The Fisherman's Mark organization. The main building on the campus still bears the reverend's name.

Fisherman's Mark believes in building relationships with its clients and supporting them for however long it takes for the client to pull himself out of his troubled situation. It does not turn away anyone who presents a need.

The organization provides social services, counseling, and community outreach programs. The social service program provides direct support services as well as nutritional programs, tutorial services, and vocational and educational services that enhance employment opportunities.

Fisherman's Mark also provides on-staff individual counseling and self help groups. The community outreach programs help the elderly,

homebound, youth, and homeless.

The executive director of Fisherman's Mark, Barbara Petty, is particularly proud of the work that Scott Goodman has done.

“He was instrumental in the development of our childcare program,” Petty said.

Thanks to Goodman, Fisherman's Mark offers a full day childcare program, Lambertville Academy (12 hours a day, 12 months a year). It also offers before- and after-school care as well as a 12-hour a day summer camp.

Fisherman's Mark is unique in that it provides specific services that extend other area organizations' services. For instance, while Women's Crisis Services deals with domestic violence against women, it is unable to provide services for men or grandparents suffering from domestic abuse. This is where Fisherman's Mark takes over.

Along the same lines, hospice organizations are able to provide grief counseling for blood relatives of ailing individuals only. Fisherman's Mark picks up the slack and extends its services to friends as well as family. It provides grief counseling for children who lose friends and loved ones to whom they are not related.

It is about building a community support system, so there becomes less of a chance of anyone falling through.

During the holiday season, as well as the rest of the year, Fisherman's Mark runs a pantry in the style of Second Harvest (The National Food Bank), meaning individuals are able to “shop” for what they need. Other pantries simply offer prepacked bags. This often results in unwanted and unused food. Fisherman's Mark's system enables one to maintain a sense of independence as well.

Fisherman's Mark also provides sodium and sugar free food for individuals with special health needs.

In the beginning of October, current clients of Fisherman's Mark are able to sign up for Thanksgiving Baskets, Christmas Baskets, and Gifts for Children. Local grocery stores and food banks donate the food. Turkey, starches, vegetables, and desserts are included in each basket, providing families with the essentials for a health meal.

Individuals and organizations within the community also donate the gifts.

In December 1999, Fisherman's Mark purchased the historic Kohl House, which it plans to renovate and convert into an elevator and stair tower. This tower would be connected to the pre-existing Elvin K. Smith Memorial Hall, making it handicap accessible.

After nearly three years of construction the new structure, known now as the Tower Annex, is complete. The new tower makes Elvin K. Smith Memorial Hall the only handicap accessible building open to the public in the area. It will be open to the public at the start of the new year.

During the renovation, Fisherman's Mark has not been able to have as strong of a hand in the community as it would have liked, Petty said. It has, instead, depended strongly on the kindness of outside contributors. Now, with the construction finished, the organization plans to hold about five separate fund-raisers during the upcoming year, Petty said.

Fisherman's Mark relies on the support of foundations, corporation, and individuals to continue to assist their clients. If you'd like to learn more about the organization or offer your help, it can be contacted at 609-397-7485 or 609-397-0194.

Various naming opportunities are still available for individuals offering sizeable donations.

Fisherman's Mark is the area's largest social service organization serving individuals and families from Bucks and Montgomery Counties in Pennsylvania, as well as Hunterdon, Warren, Somerset, and Mercer

Counties in New Jersey.

Many of its clients do not know where else to turn. They are faced with, for the first time in their lives, a need for assistance. Fisherman's Mark offers them support during their time of need.