

Store closing meant service to those in need in the Beaches community

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There is that silver lining to every cloud. The closing of the Williams Sonoma store in St. Johns Center was sad news to a lot of Jacksonville's cooks. But the silver lining came in the form of 43 boxes that arrived at Community Presbyterian Church, Atlantic Beach.

The Rev. Jessi Higginbotham received a call from the manager of the closing store.

"I didn't get how they got connected to me," she said. "He mentioned a referral from the soup kitchen."

No specific ministry of the church was mentioned and she was not sure what would be coming.

"When Williams Sonoma closes a store, they are asked to donate to charity the items that can't be placed in an outlet or sent to another store. This includes displays or equipment used in cooking classes. I was asked if we were interested."

The truck from Community Presbyterian's long-standing ministry, Our Father's Housewares, was sent to pick up the boxes.

"I had no idea what we would get," she said.

"My parents, Pam and David Higginbotham, came from Orange Park and helped me unpack. They helped me label things, some of which I didn't recognize. It was a fun day."

From there, this significant donation, valued at \$25,000, began its service to the community. It was split between three ministries.

First, a part went to the Youth Auction, which enables a vibrant youth program which attracts youth from the community as well as the youth of the church.

"We kept some of the catering items

for our church kitchen," Rev. Higginbotham said.

The largest part of the donation, "90 percent of the items," are going to Our Father's Housewares (OFH).

This ministry serves those in need in the Beaches, from north Ponte Vedra Beach through Mayport. Started by Bill Beaton in 2003, it began as a small ministry which he eventually gave to Community Presbyterian. Its mission is to provide furniture and housewares to those in need. It has grown through the years.

Leads come from social service agencies or directly from those asking for help. OFH has no agenda other than service.

"We work with all kinds of agencies - Catholic, Jewish, Mosques - all charities. While some businesses hesitate to work with a religious organization, there is no religious connection to our non-profit ministry."

The largest need of this mission is beds.

"We give out 350 beds a year or a bed a day," Rev. Higginbotham said. "Donated mattresses are accepted. Just not ones they have been put outside by the road. We have travelled far for a mattress."

From the start, the philosophy of OFH has been, "No one should have to sleep on the floor."

Since coming to Community Presbyterian, Rev. Higginbotham has worked with local business owners to show how retail businesses and OFH can mutually benefit from a partnership. The donations are a tax benefit but it goes beyond that.

"When closing a business, we have a truck that will come to you and remove items you don't want but which can help others.



photo submitted

The Rev. Jessi Higginbotham of Community Presbyterian Church with some of the items received from the Williams Sonoma store at its closing.

"We recently had a call from an ambulance service which was going out of business. This donation helped multiple people."

To donate, you can contact OFH di-

rectly though the hotline, 904-930-5654.

"We pick up and deliver three days a week. We will keep doing it until people don't need it anymore."