

Spending Their Moments Improving The World

West Hartford lawyer and her friends provide items, services for needy

By KAREN ALI

New beds for a needy family from Africa. A laptop for a woman who wasn't able to leave her house much. Snow shoveling services for an elderly woman.

Those are some of the items and services that West Hartford lawyer Stephanie Gitlin and the organization she helped found — Deeds for Needs — has provided to Hartford area residents.

About 10 years ago, Gitlin and two of her friends — all stay-at-home moms at the time — were looking to do something beyond parent-

said. "I don't think we've ever said 'no' to anybody. We would never want to turn anyone away."

Gitlin said the three are inspired by a quotation from Anne Frank, a Jewish girl who became famous after her diary documenting her family's persecution by the Nazis was published after World War II: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Over the last 10 years, Deeds for Needs has helped about 50 people. All clients are from the greater Hartford area, and most are referrals from Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford and local synagogues. The most they have spent to help someone out is about \$2,000, Gitlin said.

But the organization offers services and not cash. "We don't like to give people money," Gitlin said. "If they need help with food, we give them a gift certificate to Big Y."

They will also write a check for someone's rent, if needed, she said. Or, they will purchase the bed or other item for the person who needs it, she said. The women have also helped people who need household and baby items, air conditioning and gas.

Legal Skills

Deeds for Needs' co-founders are Melissa Weinstock, whose background is as a consultant, and Robin Fierston, a former teacher.

As for Gitlin, she practiced at Seiger Gfeller Laurie and Shipman & Goodwin before taking



West Hartford lawyer Stephanie Gitlin (left) and friends Melissa Weinstock and Robin Fierston provide people in need with everything from grocery gift cards to laptops to baby items.

time off for motherhood. She's now practicing at Pierce LLC in West Hartford, where she specializes in health care cost containment and False Claim Act litigation, among other areas.

Gitlin said her legal skills have helped the organization from the beginning. "We really run it like a non-profit organization," she said. "We run it professionally, we keep files, we keep notes," she said. She also recalls using her legal knowledge when helping a woman — an Israeli immigrant — negotiate with U.S. Customs officials to get fines reduced and confiscated possessions returned.

Besides helping individuals with their needs, Gitlin (a former board member of Jewish Family Services) and her two co-founders have or-

ganized winter clothing drives, partnering with the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. Also, with help from the National Council of Jewish Women, they collected Chanukah care packages for Jewish service men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, in cooperation with Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, they collected new toys for Ethiopian children in Absorption Centers in Israel.

When Deeds for Needs was just starting, Gitlin said, the founders often dipped into their own pockets to provide the help for others. These days, donations come from family friends and community members who hear about the organization. When the founders need specific items, they send out a request via an email list.

"We don't have the same type of red tape" as larger organizations that get government money, Gitlin said. "All three of us volunteer our time, no salaries, and have de minimis overhead costs."

Last year was particularly successful. "In 2012, we purchased a new bed and bedding for a teenage boy who gave up his bed for his ailing grandfather," Gitlin said. The trio also "helped move an older woman into an independent living facility, and paid a veterinary bill for a beloved service dog."

Then there was the woman with multiple sclerosis. "She was shut in. We were able to get a laptop donated for her." Now she's hooked up, thanks to Deeds for Needs. ■

For more information about Deeds for Needs, email deedsforneeds@comcast.net.



ing. But it had to be some endeavor they could run out of their homes. They started out with the aim of helping needy Jewish people in the area. But ultimately, they've ended up helping out people of all faiths.

"The three of us are Jewish and we felt the need to help people in our communities," Gitlin

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