

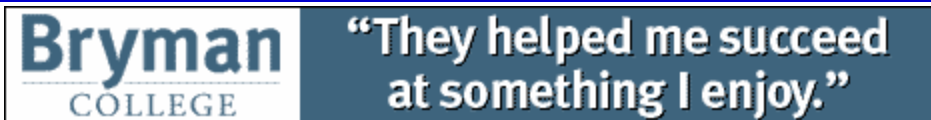
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New Britain

Charity coordinates donations for rural poor

By JC REINDL , Staff Writer

11/20/2003

PLAINVILLE --The director at The Box Project's national headquarters in Plainville apologized Thursday afternoon for the office being so hectic. Everyone was hurried, he said, because the organization had been finishing up an extraordinary deal.

"Russ Teddy Bears Company in California just donated 5,000 teddy bears!," Allen Pitts said, who has been executive director of The Box Project for three years now.

Such donations have become increasingly routine since he assumed directorship of the organization three years ago.

Since Pitts arrived, The Box Project has significantly expanded its offerings to the rural needy. From its incorporation in 1968 until 2000, the organization's primarily focus had been attending to the poor in rural Mississippi. Although few of their target families live in urbanized Connecticut, the charity provides aid today to families in 15 states.

The project's mission is to encourage families and individuals living in rural, economically depressed areas of the United States to become self-sufficient -- and ultimately to break the cycle of poverty, according to the organization's guidelines.

The group provides aid through matching volunteer sponsor families and individuals with the needy. In addition to giving "boxes" of needed supplies, the sponsors also give encouragement, advice, support and friendship to the recipient families. The primary job of The Box Project headquarters is to work with social service agencies while facilitating relationships between sponsors and recipients, according to Pitts, who said the program does not accept donations since there is no storage space.

"There are many times when social service agencies cannot provide the material things needed. And certainly cannot provide friendship, personal care, mentoring and a wider view of the world," Pitts said.

The project will provide more than \$4 million this year in direct aid to poverty-stricken rural individuals, Pitts said. The headquarters has three staff positions, and is located upstairs in an office building near Dairy Queen on East Street.

While expanding its recipient base beyond Mississippi, Pitts said the project began providing support to Native American families from the rural Lakota Sioux tribe of South Dakota. Engineering the support structure for the tribe has been one of his greatest challenges as director, Pitts said, because of the cultural differences between the typical American and the average Sioux.

Near the end of one visit to the reservation, Pitts said he discovered that many Sioux youths were the neediest of all the children he had ever encountered. He said he felt that their need was so urgent, that they could not wait for him to match their families with sponsors. That night he drove 30 miles to the nearest hamburger shop and bought the children \$400 worth of hamburgers--their favorite food.

"Those weren't just your average hungry teenagers," Pitts said, "That was real hunger."

Though the culture shock may not be as great for sponsors corresponding with families in the Appalachians or rural Maine as it is for those working with Sioux families, there are still significant lifestyle differences between many poor rural families when compared to that of typical Americans, according to Box Project employee Sue Deschaine.

"If the height of your world is making it to the ninth grade without being pregnant, and then (the height) is being pregnant before the age of 18 -- that's their reality," Pitts said.

The project initially had a problem with finding ways for some sponsors to communicate with their recipient families, since a number of families do not contain a single member who can read, according to Pitts. The organization solved part of the literacy issue when volunteer comic artists from the Spiderman and Hagar series donated their time to create special brochures. These brochures use comic narrations to explain to recipients what The Box Program is, and how sponsors are trying to help their family.

With the help of a television appearance in 2000 on the "Oprah" show, the number of sponsors has grown as the program has expanded, according to Pitts. However, the demand for sponsors still outpaces supply. At last count, there were over 500 families on The Box Project's waiting list, Pitts said.

Unlike urban areas, where poverty victims are usually visible to the general population, Pitts said he believes rural poverty has not received much national attention because it is more distant and remote.

"Hollywood is so zoned in on urban issues, that they have left rural situations alone," Pitts said.

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