

Helping hands: Genesee nonprofit helps struggling families move forward

By Stephen Knapp

What with all the anxiety floating around about falling stocks and rising costs, it's worth remembering that, for many, complete financial collapse has always been just a blown gasket away.

Littleton resident Dan Georgopoulos hasn't forgotten that, and as founder and president of the nonprofit Hands of the Carpenter, he's made it his mission to help keep struggling families on the road to self-sufficiency.

"The people we help started the game of life with many of the same hopes and dreams we all do," says Georgopoulos, sitting in a Genesee office provided by Lookout Mountain Community Church. "But sometimes just one unfortunate spin can take them in a different direction. We help people get back to where they want to be."

Appropriately enough, Georgopoulos might never have found himself in a position to help so many others had his own family's fortunes not taken a turn for the worse six years ago, when his comfortable tech job got down-sized out of existence. When he wasn't trying to land increasingly scarce tech positions, he spent his suddenly abundant free time volunteering at Lookout Mountain Community Church's ministry for single parents.

"As a stranger, listening to their stories kind of blew me away," he recalls. "Most of the people I talked to were women, and whether they were alone because of abuse, divorce or death, they all had one thing in common — they had no one to help them. Once I started to understand what was going on, I started thinking, 'What can I do to help?'"

If Georgopoulos had no formal training in the trades, like most men he knew how to swing a hammer and push a saw. What he could do, he decided, was help single moms with the endless list of household repairs that make the difference between a home and a hazard.

"Our main concern was the families' safety and well-being. I picked up a little plumbing and electric a few years back, and we had other volunteers from the church who knew more. Whatever we didn't feel comfortable doing ourselves we hired out."

By the end of 2003, Georgopoulos found himself dedicating three full days a week to his charitable avocation, with far too many necessary projects going undone. Seven months of job-hunting had yielded no firm prospects, and he had the well-being of his wife, Brenda, and their four children to consider. It was time to spin the wheel.

"With Brenda's support, I started doing this full time. Others saw what we were doing and stepped in. That was enough to meet the needs of the people in our church, but we realized that by becoming a nonprofit organization, we could start meeting the needs of people outside the church."

Foundation grants were procured, private donors stepped up, and Hands of the Carpenter began the daunting task of meeting the needs of single parents, widows and the elderly

throughout Denver and Jefferson counties. To meet growing demand, Georgopoulos hired the organization's only other paid employee, Joe Auger, to man the phones, keep the books and manage the expanding database. And, by 2005, the organization's focus on safe housing had shifted to a more pressing need — safe and reliable transportation.

"It took us two years to figure out that most of the people we help don't own their own houses; they rent," Georgopoulos explains. "But almost all of them own their own car, usually 10 to 15 years old and not well-maintained. That car can mean the difference between self-sufficiency and living on the street or going on welfare.

"An elderly person's car makes it possible to get to the store, to the doctor. A single mom's car gives her the ability to get her kids to school, to the day care, and to get to work and make the rent. No car, no job, no home. Without a car, everything else can fall apart in a hurry.

"A lot of them are already barely meeting their bills and can't afford basic upkeep, let alone major repairs. And one thing we found out was that a lot of these women were getting cheated by mechanics who do unnecessary work, or charge them for work they never did."

Given the enormous safety issues involved in car repair, Hands of the Carpenter relies on professionals for all but the simplest jobs. Thankfully, if some mechanics are inclined to take advantage of the vulnerable and unwary, many more are disposed to lend a neighbor a helping hand.

"We have several garages that give us big discounts, and a Golden car dealership just started helping us out. We couldn't help nearly as many people as we do without their help."

Even so, last year's parts and labor bills ran to more than \$70,000, for services rendered to more than 150 families needing more than 300 separate repairs. Still, the need far outstrips Georgopoulos' resources, and Hands of the Carpenter now functions on a pay-as-can basis.

"Whether it's \$5, \$20, or \$50, it's whatever they can afford without taking money away from basic food and housing. The important thing is that they're driving a safe, reliable vehicle."

Although Georgopoulos can't foresee a day when Hands of the Carpenter runs out of people in Denver and Jefferson counties who need his help, he does see a way to increase its reach.

"We're hoping to open our own auto shop next year," he explains. "It would allow us to do repairs in an at-cost environment, and we could provide repairs to the public as a way to support repairs for the needy. It could also offer potential employment and work experience for moms in transition."

In the meantime, Georgopoulos, Auger and their small group of donors and volunteers will continue to help drifting families steer back to better road. And Georgopoulos' stalled tech career? It's up on blocks indefinitely.

"This is so important, I have to trust that God had a hand in what I'm doing now," he says. "The thing is, I don't think I would have been able to make the decision to quit my job and do this. It took losing my job to see what needed to be done."

To learn more about Hands of the Carpenter, call 303-526-4488 or visit www.handsofthecarpenter.org.