

Making It Home

Tenaflly woman brings together furniture for new lives

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There were two seemingly unconnected problems that Cynthia Massarsky of Tenaflly addressed with one masterstroke.

The first is her understanding that it is hard to make an empty room into a home. It takes stuff – tables, chairs, couches, shelves – to take a barren space and transform it into a place that can support, even nourish, life. The people who find themselves in such bare spaces often are at points in their lives where such support is necessary if they are to make it, Ms. Massarsky learned.

The second was her need to take the skill, drive, and ambition that had fueled her career as a consultant into her new post-retirement life and do something that matters.

Making It Home, her new nonprofit venture, is the organization that grew out of those two problems. Ms. Massarsky created it to “bring furniture to low-income disabled veterans and all sort of other folks who are in need and don’t have anything to sleep in or eat on.” It’s a public/private partnership, now part of the Bergen Volunteer Center in Hackensack.

Ms. Massarsky spent much of her career at the intersection between public and private enterprises. She’s worked in marketing for nonprofits including Save the Children, Covenant House, and the National Council for Jewish Women, to pick almost at random from a very long list of very good causes. She started her own firm, CWM Marketing Group, in 1990; before that, she worked in the profit sector at Scholastic Books and even before that (in a startling blast from the very sadly nearly forgotten past), in the nonprofit world, on Marlo Thomas’s Free To Be Foundation.

So when Hurricane Sandy hit, three years ago, the not-yet-retired Ms. Massarsky decided that she had to do something to help, and that she had the skills to tackle a part of the problem that others had not addressed. She was very good at putting companies together with people who could not afford their wares but needed them desperately nonetheless. “I got Bob’s Discount Furniture to provide free furniture to a family whose house was devastated by the storm, and who had two kids with disabilities,” she said.

From there, she helped furnish garden apartments in Tenaflly for people with disabilities. “The neat aspect was that I created a gift registry, and people could go online and order a piece of furniture,” she said. It was funded by donors. She got word out about the project by blanketing Tenaflly – the town where she has lived for 35 years, and which she loves – with postcards describing the need and the



Cynthia Massarsky at the wheel.

solution. It worked.

“It was the opposite of Not In My Backyard,” she said proudly. “The impulse wasn’t to shove away the existence of this project. Instead, it was ‘Let’s show everybody what a great community we are.’”

Those were discrete tasks, though, and she’d been semi-retired then anyway. What next?

“When I started looking for my next project, I realized that during the previous ones I had gotten so many calls from people who had used furniture,” she said. “People wanted to keep their furniture out of landfills; they didn’t want to throw it away.” But they were redecorating or downsizing. “They asked me if people with disabilities could use the furniture, and I had to say no.” Not then.

The idea percolated, though.

“I kept getting calls from town residents, from children of seniors, or from realtors selling the houses of people who had died. They’d say, ‘Oh my God, I’m stuck with a houseful of furniture.’”

Ms. Massarsky realized that in fact she could work with this furniture after all. “And this is the project I’m sticking with,” she said.

“People send us pictures of furniture, and if it looks like it’s going to work” – if it’s in good shape – “we gather a troop of volunteers, which includes police officers and people who work for moving companies, who do this gratis.”

She’s surprised and touched by how enthusiastic police officers can be about her work. “They have what we need,” she said. “They have trucks, they have

muscles, they are community-service oriented, and they have days off.

“So we find the volunteers, and we coordinate with them and get the furniture.”

But what to do with it? Furniture is not only heavy, it’s big and bulky and often has to be stored. It’s not as if furniture gets picked up from one house and deposited directly in another. “Westy Self-Storage is a family-owned business that operates in New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island, and New York. They give us complimentary space, and they schlep the stuff in and out of the warehouse.

“That’s what makes it work.

“It’s not like what we do is such an incredibly new idea, but most nonprofits can’t handle either the logistics or the storage piece.”

How did she do it? “I just went in and asked,” she said. “I just said we need space. I’m not shy,” she added, unnecessarily.

The other half of the equation is the people who will live with the new furniture. “On the client end, we work with the county’s Housing Health and Human Services Center in Hackensack,” she said. The center includes a homeless shelter, “an award-winning shelter, and the people who run it are amazing,” Ms. Massarsky said. “They give us the names of clients who are leaving the shelter and are renting apartments.

“The center also helps clients get entitlements, Section 8 vouchers, all sorts of help they didn’t know they could get,” she added. Most of the clients with whom she works are disabled and cannot hold down jobs, but the center helps them realize that “they can live, and not have to live on the streets.”

So now they have apartments, and emotional and financial support, and they want to start their lives again, but “how can you start fresh in a white box?” Ms. Massarsky said. That’s where Making It Home comes in. “Technically people can’t choose their furniture – that would be a logistical nightmare – but we ask them what they would like, and we try to accommodate. Most people, with rare exceptions, are so thrilled to have anything at all.

“Basically, we walk into completely empty apartments, with not even a square of toilet paper – they just get a voucher for a bed – so they are so thrilled to have somebody come in and give them something to sit on.”

AJ Luna is the director of veteran ser-

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vices at Bergen County’s division of veteran services, and not coincidentally a veteran himself. Mr. Luna tells a story about one particular client of Making It Home, a 74-year old disabled veteran on a fixed income who had lived in an apartment in Woodbridge until the house was foreclosed and he was forced out. “He ended up in the shelter,” Mr. Luna said. Eventually, the county found another apartment for him, this time in Lyndhurst.

“I connected with Cynthia, and they got him a bedroom set and a kitchen table and chairs. They set him up pretty nice,” Mr. Luna said. The Lyndhurst police department moved him.

“Cynthia has been tremendous,” Mr. Luna said. “I like working with her. She is a go-getter, and an example for all of us about working together for the community.”

Ms. Massarsky, who is Jewish, said this work she has chosen to do “is major tikkun olam. It’s repairing the world. It is bringing an entire community together to do good, without any expectation of anything in return.

“That’s entirely what we’re about.”

To learn more, or to donate, email Cynthia Massarsky at cmassarsky@making-it-home.org or google “Making It Home” Hackensack.