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Behind the scenes

• Charity conduit: Staff of one takes in, gives out donated goods

By **Doug Smock**
Staff writer

Charity doesn't work when someone has something to give but nobody is able to take it. John deBlecourt believes it doesn't have to be that way.

As the man who operates the Believe in West Virginia storehouse, he serves as a conduit between companies that donate products large and small, and dozens of churches and other nonprofit groups. The organization serves an area roughly from Parkersburg through Charleston and Huntington and all over Southern West Virginia.

With one trailer available to pick up goods, the storehouse operates in a 5,000-square foot warehouse in the rear of the former Dondale Furniture on Lakeview Drive in Cross Lanes.

In his words, the collection of goods passing through the storehouse is eclectic. One side is loaded with windows ready for use in building projects. Another rack is chock full of office supplies and videos. Elsewhere, you'll find food and personal care items.

The slogan on the door of the storehouse gives those goods a common thread: "Sharing Tangible Hope."

"We get a variety of things, and it changes from truckload to truckload," he said. "We never know exactly what we're going to have until the truck shows up and we say, 'Thank you,' and we'll find somebody to take advantage of it."

About 130 groups have benefited from the program, deBlecourt estimates, with about 40 organizations joining as active paying members. One such beneficiary last week was Appalread, an AmeriCorps program based at Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College in Logan. The literacy program tutors children from pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Appalread project coordinator Beth Deaton and two colleagues loaded a minivan with notebook binders, some children's movies to be used as rewards for participation in activities, portrait books on the 9/11 attacks to be donated to school libraries and numerous other items.

For less than a tank of gas, Appalread saved a lot of money it can use elsewhere.

"We can easily come in here and take \$2,000 of product that, ordinarily, we couldn't get," said Deaton.

Both deBlecourt and Believe in West Virginia, founded in 2002 by the Rev. Jack Henry, do much more than run a storehouse.



John deBlecourt loads various items on a dolly as Beth Deaton of Appalread picks and chooses her order.

Photographer: Chip Ellis

"We really focus on four different areas," he said. "We want to be a catalyst to change the economic, spiritual, political and social life of West Virginia, allowing the people of West Virginia to be all that God's called them to be."

But he puts much time and effort into the storehouse. Much like a college athletics coach, he finds himself doing as much recruiting as actual administration, and he has to do it on two fronts: beating the corporate bushes for donated products; and then telling prospective recipients what is available.

"I spend, minimally, three, probably four days a week just working on the storehouse, trying to get the word out," he said.

The storehouse has some set hours on Tuesday and Thursday, with other availability by appointment. He takes great pains to be flexible and to be able to deal with groups one-on-one. His working hours definitely vary.

As Believe in West Virginia's executive director, deBlecourt is a paid staff of one. He graciously accepts all the volunteer help he can muster.

"When I get a tractor-trailer load in, we try to set an average of one hour to get the truck unloaded," he said. "That's 26 pallets worth of product; that's usually 36,000 pounds worth of product. It's a lot of stuff to move for one person, so I absolutely rely on volunteers."

Ultimately, he wants to boost the membership to about 100 groups and to make Believe in West Virginia self-sustaining enough to perhaps transport donations to the field, and maybe to at least double that staff of one. He enjoys managing the storehouse, but wouldn't mind giving it up someday.

"The goal is to work myself out of a job here," he said, "and be able to bring in a full-time manager for the storehouse and allow me to go on and develop other projects that the board wants to implement."

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