

# HELPING HANDS

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Charlie's Closet:  
there when you  
need them

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

A few years ago, Joann Carson, director of Charlie's Closet, got a call from a Guilford resident. His wife was scheduled for a hip replacement—but not for several months. She was in so much pain that she couldn't get down the stairs.

Where could he hire a couple of men to help her?

The upbeat, pixie-haired Carson had a better solution. "We said 'how 'bout we get you a hospital bed?'" she recalled. A day later, a truck carrying a bed and a wheelchair arrived at his house. After the wife had her surgery and could get around on her own, they gave them back. Total fee for the bed and the wheelchair: two dollars.

Then there was the terminally ill elderly man who had been reduced to sleeping on his living-room couch because he had to wait a Medicare-mandated three months to get a hospital bed. Once a Hospice aide alerted Charlie's Closet to his situation, there was a bed delivered to his house the next morning. As Carson put it: "there's not always a correlation between a health condition and an insurance timeline, and that's where we come in."

And, on a gleaming morning just last week, volunteers Gwen Fletcher and John McGuire stood in front of the handsome post-and-beam two-story red barn that currently houses Charlie's Closet, preparing to load a sling lift, a hydraulic device that



Photo by Melanie Stengel

From left: Gwen Flecher, John McGuire and Joann Dunn of Charlie's Closet. Below, a new lift for the truck makes moving equipment easier.

allows patients to be moved between a bed and a chair, onto McGuire's truck. "Most accidents in the home happen during bed to chair transfers," said Fletcher, "and this solves the problem."

Fletcher would know. The longtime Guilford resident known as one of "Charlie's Angels" for her gentle, hands-on approach has been with Charlie's Closet virtually from the beginning. That was in January 1998, when Charlie McGowan, then Board president of the Guilford Interfaith Ministries, came by its office

in search of an electric stair lift for a neighbor diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. At the time, G.I.M., founded in 1985 to address the needs of frail, elderly residents, included the Meals on Wheels and Friendly Visiting programs.

It was after the staff found a stair lift in an auction house that it hit them, according to Fletcher.

"If one person desperately needed equipment and didn't know where to go, how many more were there?"

See CHARLIE'S CLOSET, Page 6



# Charlie's Closet: There when you need them

From page 1

By December, the so-called Charlie's Closet was regularly providing equipment for loan.

In the 12 years since, those involved with the clearing-house of medical supplies have been quietly doing their part to reform health care in the area—not only for the elderly and people struggling to live with disabilities but also for those temporarily laid up—taking donations of used medical equipment and cutting through red tape to get it to those in need.

“That’s our mission,” said Fletcher as she stood amid stacks of mattresses, collections of canes, and groups of walkers in the soft light of the sawdust-smelling barn. “To help anyone who needs it at the time. Anyone. We’re dealing with people who may find themselves at a particularly hard time in their lives, and they need the equipment quickly.”

Initially Fletcher and fellow volunteer Dottie Volosin, whose efforts have been recognized by Yankee Magazine and the Guilford Chamber of

Commerce, used a six-by-eight shed for storage and a Subaru for deliveries. The first year, there were about 70 calls for equipment and supplies. In the next few years, that number quadrupled, as did the number and variety of donations.

That was when the affable, twinkly-eyed John McGuire came in. In 2000, recently retired as an engineer and already volunteering for G.I.M., he was recruited by Charlie's Closet, mostly, as he put it, “because I had a truck.”

But McGuire has been no mere driver. As Charlie's Closet grew from the shed to two 10-foot trailers donated by the town to, currently, the state-of-the-art 625-square-foot barn and two-story office space, McGuire's truck has evolved from an ordinary Ford Ranger into a specialized rig with a hydraulic lift installed for transporting heavier equipment like motorized scooters and other large or unwieldy

medical equipment.

McGuire, a grandfather of eight, may claim that he outfitted his truck “for other things” in addition to the deliveries he makes for Charlie's Closet. But there's no denying his drives almost every morning from Orange to Old Saybrook, usually with Fletcher, exchanging lift chairs, trapezes for beds, battery-powered wheelchairs, and special mattresses for a

mere dollar and a request to return the equipment when it's no longer required. “Whatever they need,” he said, echoing, perhaps inadvertently, the unofficial mission statement of Charlie's Closet.

McGuire also was a prime player in the realization of the two-building complex, securing donations, overseeing construction, and, among other self-imposed tasks, installing the stone patio and digging a trench for underground wires, in addition to enlisting local

**We're dealing with people who may find themselves at a particularly hard time in their lives.**

contractors at reduced cost.

“I wasn't alone,” said McGuire. “It really was a community effort, from the G.I.M. Board to the volunteers to all the people who donated their materials and workmanship.”

He might have added the Guilford Housing Authority which gave Charlie's Closet a 99-year lease on the Sachus Hollow land for a dollar a year; that, in turn, qualified the project for a \$75,000 state grant in 2008 to build the barn and the adjoining G.I.M. office. Not to mention architect Chris Widmer of Green Planet Options in Guilford who, upon designing the barn and office space, helped shepherd G.I.M.'s application for solar panels through the town and state.

The panels may largely cover the cost of electricity for the two-story G.I.M. office building, but that's not to say

that Charlie's Closet is set, financially speaking. According to director Carson, the organization is running short on adjustable canes and shower chairs, and they can always use more volunteers.

Most of all, though, it's funding for the day-to-day operations they're seeking, particularly from towns other than Guilford that use Charlie's Closet.

“People have been extraordinarily generous for specific projects,” she said, as she sorted donations of safety bars, disposable bed pads, and crutches in the breezeway that acts as a staging area for drop-offs and pick-ups after hours. “But we're still getting by on a shoestring.”

Which shouldn't be taken as Carson complaining. Not at all. “There isn't a day that goes by that a client doesn't tell us how we've made a difference

in their life or with their loved one.” Fletcher agreed. “It's a gift,” she said simply. “To get so much more out of it than I give.”

Charlie's Closet is located on 310 State Street, Unit 200 in Guilford and is open from 9:00 A.M. to 12 noon Monday through Friday. To learn more about Charlie's Closet and G.I.M., visit [www.charliescloset.org](http://www.charliescloset.org) or come out to support G.I.M.'s programs. For more information, call 203-453-8359.



Charlie's Closet in Guilford in the red barn, 310 State Street, Unit 200.



Donated crutches at Charlie's Closet in Guilford. Photo Melanie Stengel