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Noank-based nonprofit group aims to ‘Serve!’

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NOANK — For the last eight years a small group of Noank residents have volunteered to help those less fortunate. Most of their work is local, contributing food, school supplies and toys to needy families. Sometimes they contribute relief to a national disaster area, sending emergency packages of the basics to people who literally have nothing and would welcome something as simple as a tube of toothpaste.

Their organization is named, appropriately, “Serve!” and their reputation and membership is still growing.

Recently they donated Easter baskets for “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren,” a program run by the Groton Family Support Center.

At the same time they prepared Easter dinner boxes for families in need in Ledyard, including a spiral honey ham, fruit, vegetables and even dessert.

Recently they have been busy providing assistance to area families victimized by fire.

The force behind the nonprofit is Deborah Hadden, its founder.

The idea to form a nonprofit began in 2005, when her husband’s military unit was shipped to Iraq to fight in the war.

“We began to ship out care packages to them and they were appreciative,” Hadden said.

In order to do the job successfully, Hadden immediately took steps to become a 501(c)(3) organization. At first, 70 percent of its time was devoted to military packages. Now they take a broader approach.

“We have dedicated our organization to provide assistance for education, federal disaster response, hunger and military support,” Hadden said.

The nonprofit meets biweekly for a one-hour brainstorming and planning session where ideas are shared and developed. “I don’t think we’ve ever said no to request,” Hadden said.

At first they began preparing gift bags for the children of military personnel. That led to emergency response packages of personal hygiene items for national disasters.

In 2008, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was hit by a flood larger than ever before. Serve! provided emergency supplies. At almost the same time a tornado ripped through a Boy Scout camp in the same area, Little Sioux, killing four Scouts. The organization formed a scholarship program in their honor.

They have sent goods to Southern Rhode Island to assist the federal disaster flood victims of 2010; to the town of West, Texas, to aid those caught in the fertilizer factory explosion that killed 15, injured almost 200 and leveled 150 buildings; and have sent assistance to tornado victims in Oklahoma and Nebraska.

The charity also donates a variety of materials to one-room schoolhouses throughout the country, most of which are severely underfunded. From physical repairs on Prudence Island in Narragansett Bay, to an indoor bathroom in Montana (to replace the two outhouses), to snowshoes in Vermont, Serve! has seen it all.

But make no mistake, they are very aware of the needs of the area. They regularly donate to six food or supply pantries from Westerly to Groton, including the Ledyard and Groton food lockers, Christ Church in Westerly, the Jonnycake Center, W.A.R.M. and the Tower Street Community Center. They also organize specific donations for families in need, and donate backpacks and school supplies for children.

Serve! also supports the Coast Guard, sending gift packages for the sailors at sea during the Christmas season. “Some of the local schoolchildren have gotten involved, making cards for them, even Valentine’s Day cards,” said volunteer Evie Robinson.

“Whenever we contribute donations to those in need we do it through a third party, someone that represents them, so there is always complete anonymity,” Robinson said.

It’s a grass-roots organization, receiving all its income from donations throughout the area.

June 19 fundraiser

“We have one annual fundraiser, a bowl-a-thon at Alley Katz. This year it’s on June 19 at 6 p.m.

We were also very fortunate to receive a \$1,000 hunger grant from Walmart. That’s helped out a lot,” Hadden said.

Serve! has placed donation boxes and money collection boxes at establishments along the south coast. Frequently, some stores donate materials or gift cards, and of course residents also donate.

With their fundraiser close at hand, Serve! is looking for sponsors and is always seeking volunteers, donations and contributions. The organization can be contacted at servenonprofit@yahoo.com.