

Rotary helps out with the long-winter's nap

By Kevin Zimmerman

Wednesday, December 20, 2006 - Updated: 12:01 PM EST

Down a Lowell side street and inside a cavernous warehouse Friday morning it felt cold enough to be the North Pole, but the three men unloading “lots of goodies” from “Santa’s” donated semi-truck didn’t look much like elves.

Tom Callery, Bob DeCoste and Jacob Montanez may have 3 feet on the average elf, but they definitely spent several hours standing in for St. Nick as they moved more than 100 brand-new mattresses into the Lowell Wish Project’s space just in time for Christmas.

Of course, plenty of Santa’s other helpers from the Chelmsford Rotary Club were on hand to make sure the beds were ready to be distributed to families in need throughout the Merrimack Valley.

The mattress story doesn’t begin at Santa’s workshop but rather at a Long Island, New York warehouse by way of a five-star hotel in the heart of Manhattan.

A clerical error led to the hotel’s order for 100 mattresses being doubled. So, the full-size beds, still wrapped in plastic made their way to storage.

That’s when Chelmsford Rotary member John Taylor of John Taylor Associates stepped in.

Taylor, who is a hotel furniture distributor for the New York-New England region, figured the mistake could help hundreds of people back home.

“We as a club thought this was great,” said Charles Keen, past president of Chelmsford Rotary. “They were free to us — we just paid the freight — and we can use them in our community.”

Rotary, which runs several community-service projects throughout the year — including blood drives, Chelmsford High School scholarship programs and Paul Center fundraising — rarely deals in such physically large donations.

But the club identified the need, said Keen, and now it needed someone or some group who could handle the large donation and make sure people who needed a bed got one.

Which brings the story back to Lowell and Donna Hunnewell, founder and executive director of the Lowell Wish Project.

Hunnewell started her organization about six years ago out of her minivan, she said. It’s been housed off Plain Street in Lowell for the last year and a half.

Rather than distributed cash or gift certificates to individuals, Hunnewell works with more than 100 social services throughout the Greater Lowell-Southern New Hampshire area. Clients place a wish, and Hunnewell tries to fill it.

“We are all about goods not money getting out,” said Hunnewell. “We facilitate getting stuff in and out. These beds will help fill wishes going back up to six months.”

For more information on the Lowell Wish Project, check out its Web site at www.thewishproject.org



Bob DeCoste, Jacob Montanez and Tom Callery unload mattresses at the Lowell Wish Project's warehouse on Dec. 15. (Kevin Zimmerman)



Chelmsford Rotary Club member Charles Keen, left, and Rotary President Scott Hanley, pose with Lowell Wish Project founder Donna Hunnewell. (Kevin Zimmerman)