

Hearts heat homes

Local group gives families heating oil

By J.P. Ellery
CORRESPONDENT

NORTH BROOKFIELD — It's all about neighbor helping neighbor. Simple as that.

Suzanne Y. Lewandowski of North Brookfield said she got involved in "Hearts for Heat" because she knows what people are going through when bills pile up and the cost to heat a home becomes impossible to deal with.

Hearts for Heat, founded by Mrs. Lewandowski, is a local charitable organization established under state law that provides financially qualified residents 150 gallons of heating oil or its equivalent in other fuel sources on a once-a-year basis. Payment is made direct to the supplier.

"In 2008, when I received my oil bill at over \$4.50 per gallon," Mrs. Lewandowski said in a recent interview, "I learned it would cost me close to \$7,000 to pay for heat. After the initial shock wore off, I thought about all those who would have to go without food or medication to be warm.

"I would only have to give up my gardening addiction and some other extra comforts," she said, "but countless other families would be in serious trouble."

That is why, in late 2008 when Robert LaFlamme, who operates Crowley Fuel in town, invited her to an informational meeting on "Hearts for Heat," she immediately realized she had no choice but to participate in an idea established years earlier by Cindy Shea in Princeton.

There also are "Hearts for Heat" chapters in Spencer and Leicester, according to Mrs. Lewandowski.

To date about 30 families or individuals have been assisted in 2009 and 2010 in North Brookfield.

"We have to help each other,"

♥s for Heat to the rescue

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Mrs. Lewandowski said. "It could be any one of us that loses a job tomorrow or gets ill, and that one tank of heating oil could be the difference between being able to feed your family or get medication."

She said that even if people receive fuel assistance, such funds from the state do not come close to covering ever-increasing fuels costs. The approximate \$450 to \$500 provided an individual by "Hearts for Heat" can make a huge difference and help close that gap.

"Fuel assistance has gone down while prices have gone up," said Michelle Petraitis, president of the local "Hearts for Heat" chapter.

That \$450 to \$500 amount also is a big boost for people who barely miss making the financial guidelines to obtain state fuel assistance.

"By the time they come to us they've gone through some of the other channels and have either been rejected or used up the other resources and people are so appreciative when we help them," Mrs. Petraitis said. "A lot of them send thank notes."

"Hearts for Heat," thanks to business contributions and individual donations, will be able to assist 20 families for the next heating season late this year; applications are now being taken.

Applications can be downloaded from the website at www.heartsforheat.org/North-Brookfield/about.html. Applicants can also write to "Hearts

for Heat," P.O. Box 44, North Brookfield, MA 01535.

Mrs. Petraitis and Mrs. Lewandowski are joined by board members Louise Bouchard, Judy Manning, Ellen Smith, Joseph Zegarra and Thomas Lewandowski, all of North Brookfield.

"It's amazing that it's all driven locally," Mrs. Petraitis said. "This is all through spaghetti suppers and local people just giving."

Spencer CPA Roland Gauthier has toiled for "Hearts for Heat," and so has Christ Memorial Episcopal Church in North Brookfield.

Also, Hannaford Supermarket in North Brookfield routinely helps out "Hearts for Heat," as does North Brookfield Savings Bank, Hayden Masonic Lodge, Crowley Fuel and St. Jean's Package Store and the North Brookfield Parent-Teacher Organization, all of North Brookfield; Cormier Jewelers of Southbridge; and the Clam Box Restaurant of Brookfield.

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