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Volunteer raises thousands of dollars annually for the Aberdeen ReStore through his metal recycling efforts

ABERDEEN, MD (August 17, 2023) -- Years ago, Rob Orndorf was nicknamed the "scrap metal recycling crew of one" by the staff of the Aberdeen ReStore for his solo efforts to save tons of material from going to the landfill.

He began volunteering for the ReStore when it opened in May 2016, moving and repairing furniture; loading and unloading trucks and vehicles; and, working closely with donors. In the course of his first year there, he noticed that items that were deemed unsellable and thrown into the dumpster actually had value as scrap metal. One day, Rob started sorting through the tossed items and setting them aside to see how much he could salvage to sell at a scrap yard. Initially, Rob and the ReStore staff tried selling a couple thousand pounds of discarded items as scrap metal but they only received approximately $30 for it. Then, Rob had a different idea.

"If we take the stuff apart, separate the steel from the brass from the aluminum, we can get a lot more," Rob told the staff. "So I said, 'Let me try it' and it's been that way ever since."

"Rob is one of the unsung volunteer heroes of the ReStore," said Aberdeen ReStore Manager John Kunzelman. "He has been here from the start, uses his own truck and gas to gather and sort through our metal recycling."

Most of the items that were thrown out were damaged, had been on the store floor for months without receiving any customer interest, or could not be sold for safety or liability reasons. The varied items included lamps, silver-plated bowls, kitchen faucets, brass candlesticks, kitchen knives, batteries, etc.

"I spend a day sorting and loading my truck, then I take it to my shop," Rob said, referring to the workshop he's created at his home in Zion (northern Cecil County). His workshop, off of his garage, has a vise and set of tools for the home repairs he likes to work on in his spare time. "I take the items apart. At the end of the week, I load it up and take it to the scrap yard near my house, and I get typically $150 to $200 for the load just on my truck."

In addition to metal recycling, Rob would cut off cords from items such as microwaves, table lamps and vacuum cleaners and sell a large-box full at the scrap yard for $50-60.

"He doesn't just go to one metal recycler," explained Kunzelman. "He stops at several places to get the most for the [Habitat] mission."

"Last year was a banner year," said Rob, referring to the fact that his recycling efforts garnered approximately $15,000 for the ReStore. Normally, he raises about $8,000-9,000 each year.

"He does all of it by himself and never asks for help," said Ashley Hall, Volunteer Coordinator for the ReStore.

Rob's efforts not only raise money for the ReStore, but saves money as well, since there are associated costs ($300-400) in having to move a dumpster-load of unwanted materials.

"And you're not throwing all that stuff in a landfill; it's recyclable," said Rob. "The total weight of all the metal that I've sold – copper, brass, insulated wire, aluminum, steel, and heavy metal steel – was around 19 tons last year."

It took a little time for the ReStore staff to get used to what Rob was doing. Now, they are so supportive of his efforts that they regularly pull items aside for Rob so that he doesn't have to retrieve them from the dumpster anymore.

"Rob has been one of the most valued ReStore volunteers here since day one," said the ReStore's Assistant Manager Adam Letschin. "The amount of time and effort he puts forth each week to go through all our scrap metal to elicit the most money is truly remarkable. He did all of this without ever taking a dime for himself."

Rob's background is as varied as his hobbies. He majored in physics in college; he was a supply officer in the Navy for several years; and, he was a government contractor working in logistics (mainly aircraft repair) for 30 years.

Rob plans to "retire" from volunteering at the ReStore at the end of August so that he can focus more on his health and family obligations.

"Rob is a wonderful volunteer, and does so much for Habitat," said Hall. "He will truly be missed by many."

Letschin agreed. "His contribution to Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna and the Aberdeen ReStore through the years has been invaluable and he will be missed dearly."

"He is very humble and doesn't like to be in the spotlight," said Kunzelman, "but his efforts have never gone unnoticed to management. It will be hard to replace such an honest, reliable and hard-working volunteer! He has been here from the start of the Aberdeen ReStore. I hope he takes time now to enjoy his family and full retirement."

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About Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna, Inc.
Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna, Inc. is an ecumenical Christian housing organization devoted to building, renovating and repairing houses in partnership with the community in Cecil and Harford counties. Since its inception in 1993, Habitat Susquehanna has served over 700 families through its Homeownership, Repair and Financial Literacy programs. For more information, call 410-638-4434 (Harford County) or 410-398-3399 (Cecil County), or visit www.habitatsusq.org.