

Everybody wins

New Habitat for Humanity ReStore expands outreach, one donation at a time

by Greg Marsten
Leader staff writer

ST. CROIX FALLS – The crowd struggled with the wind chill, but the rush was hard to ignore, as more than 500 people greeted the new retail outlet for the Wild Rivers Habitat for Humanity venture called the ReStore.

“Hopefully, they have some fun, and spend some money, and leave with something,” said Wild Rivers Executive Director Eric Kube with a smile, the night before the opening.

Starting momentum

The ReStore is a store filled entirely with donated building materials, furniture, appliances, home furnishings, you name it. Everything except mattresses, bedding, clothes or toys, with all the profits going back into the Habitat for Humanity program, or to cover costs and overhead of the store.

“We probably started [accumulating donated items] last fall. What spurred this on is that ... one of the big struggles we have is funding. How do you fund something like this? It’s harder and harder to find grants. Then several times a week we’d get phone calls, asking us, ‘Hey do you guys have a ReStore?’” Kube started moving forward on a retail business plan, following Habitat procedures and guidelines. “They have to bless it ... it took about six months to get it through.”

The project had several roadblocks along the way, one of the largest being a last-minute location switch from the city’s industrial park to the former Fleet Supply building on Hwy. 8. They were able to work out a deal with the owners to make it something the Habitat board could support, and still give them enough room for product and profit.

Kube said the obvious question early on was whether they could fill the store, and also keep it filled and supplied with enough quality material to justify it as a store.

This is the 710th ReStore in the nation, with one other franchise store in the Twin Cities in New Brighton, and another in New Richmond, with almost surely more to come.

“The Habitat brand is pretty big,” Kube said, noting that the ReStore brand is going to be pushed hard in the coming years, and with that comes standards in business practices, as they learn what works, what sells and how to make it efficient and self-sustaining.

“But one of the things that helps with Habitat is momentum,” he said, as they are continuing to push for innovations on the whole concept. “We’re in the process now about stopping talking just about ‘homes,’ and to start concentrating more on families.”



Brisk weather didn’t stop a ribbon cutting to open the ReStore venture. Pictured (L to R): ReStore manager David Sandmann, Amy Matthews of the DIY Network, Habitat Executive Director Eric Kube, board President Dave Weiss, Dan Draxler of Bremer Bank, Alderman Brian Blesi and judicial candidate Jeff Anderson. – Photos by Greg Marsten

Avoiding landfills

Most anyone who has been around a construction site has noticed the big trash bins. The giant metal boxes are companions to almost all projects, and are surrounded with the litter of construction remnants. Long considered part of the process, the ReStore concept stretches that notion, and asks those involved to reconsider what is truly trash, and what is something that could be used as part of another project. It’s not just the scrap lumber, but also what is being replaced or upgraded in a remodeling project, from lights to cabinets to trim, windows and doors.

All too often, those remnant supplies are considered “just a bunch of junk,” and materials that owners pay dearly to have hauled away and eventually buried may now have a new home.

“Look at this building. All of this stuff - almost everything - would’ve ended up in a dumpster, and eventually, a landfill,” Kube said, “And it would have cost people lots of money to haul. Now they get a tax credit for that stuff.”

As an experienced cabinetmaker and business owner, he knows exactly how the process goes at construction sites. “That’s why we’re trying to get to contractors as well. These guys are so used to paying someone to haul it away in a dumpster. We’re saying call us first. If you want to pay us to haul it away that’s great, but don’t throw it away!”

The donations have already overflowed the 1,300-square-foot Fleet Supply store, with ancillary storage for now in Webster at the former Larsen Auto location, as well as more in the back storage of the ReStore outlet. Kube joked that he was hoping everything in the store would be sold on opening

day, so they could move an entirely new lot of material in for the reopening on Wednesday.

“We’ve got lots of product to move,” he said as he pointed out the stacks in the back room.

Habitat’s brand

Habitat for Humanity has been in Burnett County since 1997, with expansion into Polk County in recent years. They’ve just completed their 20th home in the two counties, with pending projects in Luck and Amery, and a recently donated tract of vacant Centuria property spooling up their first project in that village, likely set for either this year or 2012.

“We don’t give those homes away,” Kube said, repeating the mantra to stress the com-



ReStore manager Dave Sandmann counted the minutes as he unlocked the doors for business.

broad pool of volunteers,” which Habitat is hoping becomes part of a continuing expansion of services, with the marque becoming a major player in charity, assistance and possibly even home modifications for either seniors or military families, continuing in their Christian mission of helping the community.

As Habitat for Humanity expands their focus, the ReStore will be the engine behind that service expansion - casting a wider net - and it will exclusively support the Polk and Burnett County Wild Rivers projects, hopefully allowing an even wider umbrella of families to be touched.

According to Kube, Habitat has a goal of \$30/square foot annually of sales for a ReStore, meaning the St. Croix Falls outlet is eventually expecting to sell approximately \$400,000 annually of product that was previously considered refuse.

“And I think we can beat that,” Kube said



DIY Network TV star Amy Matthews (left) accepts a gift from fans Laura Seed and Erik Barstow of Dresser. The package included locally handmade art, jewelry, photos of the region and organic coffee.

mon falsehood. “That’s a common misconception. The [families] buy the homes.”

In general, the families who live there have 500-plus hours into the build on what are admittedly simple yet extremely efficient homes, which also have taxes and a mortgage, amounting to around \$500/month. They have a strict guideline for selecting families, knowing that they will also reflect upon the organization and everyone involved for years to come.

But the Habitat marque, or brand, has also generally gone against the recent foreclosure trends, as previously vacant lots not only are now producing municipal taxes, but housing a gainfully employed family, generally with kids in school, who are almost surely going from a rental to an ownership situation, which leads to obvious pride and maintenance, which in turn leads to improvement of the location, which then snowballs into other homes and general neighborhood pride, and hence higher property values, which leads to an even stronger tax base, and so on.

Just like the donation versus landfill scenario, literally everybody wins.

A service engine

The ReStore is more than just an income machine. Kube also calls it “the start of a

later, nodding solidly. “Oh yeah, I’m pretty confident we can blow that out of the water.”

If the line outside the ReStore on Saturday were any indication, Kube may be right.

“I really don’t think we’ve even tapped the market,” Kube said, noting that with the opening event and continued word of mouth, on top of big sales, he is hoping that the donations pour in even stronger, which means more product, which in turn means more turnover of product, and hence more return customers, which means more Habitat projects, and so on.

“Then, once again, everybody wins,” Kube said with a nod, his hand rubbing his neck, a slight smile slipping past the stress of reality.

What’s unique

Through an odd connection, the ReStore is an impressive outlet of sorts for 3M products, many of which were part of trade shows, displays or promotional events, and would’ve been tossed out before. Now the store has two aisles brimming with tapes, sealants, filters, caulks, and unique products that will change constantly, unlike a typical



The line of customers stretched across the store, as the lone cash register had a solid workout.

See ReStore, next page

ReStore/

home improvement store, which might not be willing to take such a risk. And the products are offered at a slight discount.

They also have furniture and fixtures, appliances and even hot tubs. Store manager Dave Sandmann ran around like a madman the day before opening, earphone strapped to his head like an aural secretary, marking product, fielding questions on donations, hours, anything.

"Oh yeah, I'm keeping busy," Sandmann joked, taking a moment to chat with a local police officer who stopped in to check out the store's progress, or maybe all the commotion.

The officer noted that the store has "lots more stuff than I ever thought," stating she wants to come back when they're actually open for business.

"I'm hooked," she admits, as Sandmann excuses himself to answer a call and run back to check on something.

The Amy factor

Kube, Sandmann and Wild Rivers Habitat for Humanity assistant Jackie Thorwick joined several other volunteers that Friday afternoon "putting out the fires" of a pre-grand-opening event that included food, games, board member presentations, promotional giveaways, a ribbon cutting, video and radio broadcasts and a visit by a certifiable TV star, Amy Matthews of the DIY Network.

Matthews is based in the Twin Cities and is arguably one of the busiest TV contractor/hosts, bar none. With four TV shows currently under her belt, she is the Ryan Seacrest of the DIY Network, quickly becoming one of the most familiar faces on TV.

Kube credits much of the event's pageantry with the amiable do-it-yourself TV host and contractor. The duo met several years ago when he was in construction in Amery. Kube's cabinet business provided a unique, recycled countertop material for her "Blog Cabin" TV program, where she was one of the hosts and lead contractor. Kube worked with her for most of a week, and the two became friends.

"She really knows her stuff," he said. "She's just a genuine, wonderful person who really cares and has a great Christian attitude about things like this."

The duo met up again at a New Orleans-based Katrina recovery project, where the connection was re-established, and Kube kept in touch for later reference. After he became the Wild Rivers executive director, and as the ReStore project bloomed, he got back in touch with her for advice and assistance. She may also be part of a future eco-home project in St. Croix Falls, and is serving as an advisor for various ReStore aspects, and agreed to lend her star power to the grand opening.

"I asked her when she was available, and she gave me this date," Kube joked. "I said, 'OK, that's it, then that's when we'll have our grand opening!'"

Matthews spent Saturday signing autographs, posing for pictures and doing interviews. She even used some leverage to get the network to ante up prizes for the event.

"People need to know that she's doing this on her time," Kube said. "That's just what kind of person she is."

The deal behind the donating

The ReStore will be open from Wednesday through Saturday, which is also when they will accept donations or do material pickups and deliveries. They are eventually hoping to expand those hours as the demand grows.

"Don't leave anything out front," Kube exclaimed. "Then it really might be trash and we'll have to pay to have it taken care of. Call us up, we'll figure something out."

The opening included short speeches by city alderman Brian Blesi, Wild Rivers Hab-



Balloons and kids go well together. Pictured (L to R): Hailey, 8, Olivia, 6 and Hannah, 8, of Osceola.

The ReStore now has a diesel cube van for deliveries and pickups, which will be orchestrated for most efficient usage of \$4/gallon fuel. They purchased the van through part of a \$35,000 Otto Bremer Foundation grant.

"Part of that money was to get the truck," Kube said. "But with fuel being so expensive, we're hoping people bring things in or make a donation."

Local Bremer Foundation and Bank executive Dan Draxler spoke at the grand opening and later reiterated the foundation's excitement with the project, which he said was exactly the kind of project they strive to be involved in.

"Absolutely," Draxler said. "The [Otto Bremer] Foundation gives away \$30 million a year, but it is so good to see a local project. And this is a great asset to the community. I can't think of a better program."

Kube also pointed out that while there were plenty of people assisting with the store's coming to fruition, almost all of them are volunteers. Only the manager, Sandmann, and assistant Thorwick are paid employees, along with Kube. The ReStore does have two people working for them through a federal program called Experience Works, for people over 55 years old, who receive help getting back into the workforce with training, retail service and experience, as well as quality labor for the store.

"They're a huge help, really," Kube said. "And the volunteers have been amazing through all of this."

The mad rush.

Maybe because of the economic downturn, it was just exciting to be a part of a grand opening - any grand opening. Or maybe it was because of the concept, and possibility of an ultrabargain on some unique item.

Regardless of why, once the store opened, the rush of well over 200 people, and another 100 or so in the first hour, was enough to tax the lone cash register, and led to an impressive line that stretched back to the hot dog counter. People waited patiently with shopping carts full of items ranging from deer racks to 3M tape to retro lamps, tarnished wind chimes, non-flat-screen TVs, odd bed frames, used cabinets of all flavors, even framed artwork - much of seeming to have a desert theme, possibly due to the wind chill.

The opening included short speeches by

at for Humanity Board members and Kube, even judicial candidate Jeff Anderson was part of it, as he relayed a Habitat story he had while working on a project in Oklahoma with a local college group. Anderson said he was lucky to work along side Habitat icon, former President Jimmy Carter.

"He worked harder than anyone," Anderson said. "Not only does he know how to use a hammer. He worked like a trooper, even more than the students. It was really something to see."

Anderson made a cash donation to the Habitat cause that day, as well, saying he was "inspired" by the store and the cause. His wife, Dessy, was even one of their first customers, purchasing a pair of vintage floor cleaners.

"I even won a door prize!" She said while waiting in line, showing off a loud-colored

trucker hat.

The price of success

As the day wore on, the crowd mingled, joked and found ways to both shop and wait in line, with one person holding a place while the other scouted for deals. The stress on the volunteers and the lone cash register was real, with neither getting a break until later that afternoon.

But nobody was complaining. In fact, they seemed to be honored to be a part of the event.

"What an amazing, cool thing," enthused Heather Johansen of Luck. She and others agreed that the ReStore was going to be perfect for people with cabins or seasonal homes or for folks who just plain couldn't afford to pay full price for some items like appliances or building materials.

"It's just so good to see stuff being used," Johansen said. "And this is a great event!"

Her sentiments were shared by many, as kids drew on hard hats with crayons, ate donated hot dogs loaded with donated ketchup, and looked for cool bedroom bargains, or sat on couches just begging for a dorm room or deer shack.

"I like the hard hats," stated 8-year-old Jake Harrel, a wide-eyed Cameron student who was coloring and eating at the same time, sort of. "There's a whole lot of people here!"

Wild Rivers board member Jon Blomstrand of Amery was also excited by the ReStore turnout, and said the event was remarkable. "This is awesome. Really awesome. We've all been wondering how it would go, and this is beyond our expectations."

"What can I say?" Kube said later on Saturday, nodding confidently as he juggled interviews, questions and logistics. "We can't thank everyone enough."

That stressful neck rubbing seeming to evaporate as the event gelled, Kube even let a few smiles slip out as the day progressed.

Again, everybody wins.

Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Eric Kube (left) accepted a \$500 donation from Polk County judicial candidate Jeff Anderson, who once worked for the organization in Oklahoma City. - Photos by Greg Marsten



PLEASE VOTE APRIL 5

Carl Holmgren

Running for . . . YOU!

General Info:

- ★ Married, six children and four grandchildren
- ★ Resident of Balsam Lake since 1992
- ★ Vietnam Veteran (U.S. Navy)
- ★ Biologist, Snow Shovel, Walker

Balsam Lake Area Involvement:

- ★ Former Polk County Board Supervisor
- ★ Balsam Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, Board of Directors
- ★ Member of the Balsam Lake American Legion Post
- ★ Commander of United 9/11 Post #3665
- ★ Member and Secretary of Parish Finance Council for Our Lady of the Lakes
- ★ Commissioner and Secretary for the Balsam Lake Protection and Rehabilitation District
- ★ Coordinator of the Clean Boats and Clean Waters program for Balsam Lake
- ★ Active fundraiser for charitable concerns including Breast Cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, Muscular Dystrophy, and Veterans concerns.

Education:

- ★ BS from University of Minnesota

Why am I running for Village President:

- ★ I was nominated; therefore I am Running For You!
- ★ This is where I chose to live, play and dine
- ★ I want Balsam Lake to be a Destination instead of a dot on the map
- ★ I want Main Street Balsam Lake to reflect that we are the County Seat for Polk County.
- ★ I want Business Owners to know they are welcome and appreciated for their investment in the community providing jobs and creating opportunities
- ★ I believe that I have the energy, experience and education, to do the job.

Balsam Lake Village President April 5th

PLEASE VOTE APRIL 5

Ballot by Candidate Carl Holmgren