

Franklin Park businesses helping Little Sisters of the Poor

BY LAURIE REES

Two local retailers in Franklin Park's T-Bones Plaza have made it their business to help less fortunate seniors get the care they deserve.

For the past five years, T-Bones Market and Shepherd's gift shop have been donating goods and money to a nursing and senior care home in Brighton Heights that is run by Little Sisters of the Poor, an international congregation of Roman Catholic women founded in 1839 that serves the elderly poor in 30 countries. The local facility was named one of the best nursing homes in the country by U.S. News and World Report. However, only 50 percent of its operating budget comes from Medicaid, so the Sisters must raise the rest from the generosity of others, hence their nickname, the "beggar Sisters."

This year, they have to raise \$3 million to keep the doors open. Linda Wagner, owner of Shepherd's, helps raise money for the Sisters by hosting a used book sale each summer and by maintaining a collection jar at the cash register, which she doubles on a quarterly basis. Her

biggest fundraiser is an annual Raffle Event, in which local restaurants, retailers, businesses, national name-brand designers and nationally recognized artisans donate a variety of items to be raffled.

There will be 24 collections raffled this year, including a Vera Bradley Coral Reef Luggage Collection, valued at \$330; a Christopher Radko Ornament Collection, worth \$328; a life-sized Santa from Ditz Designs, valued at \$995; and a grilling package containing two \$50 gift certificates plus one certified angus beef strip loin, cut to order (approximately 10 to 12 steaks), from T-Bones Market; a \$25 gift certificate to Graeter's Ice Cream Shop in Wexford, and Stonewall Kitchen BBQ sauces donated by Shepherd's.

Raffle tickets will be sold at the store through July 21 and cost between \$10 and \$30, depending on the value of each collection being raffled.

Wagner will donate 100 percent of the ticket sales to the nursing home.

The raffle will conclude July 25 with a Customer Appreciation Day, which includes store-

If you go

What: Shepherd's Raffle Event to help Little Sisters of the Poor

When: Now until July 21

Where: Shepherd's gift store, 100 VIP Drive #106, Wexford, PA 15090

Cost: Raffle tickets vary from \$10 to \$30, depending on the collection being raffled.

wide sales from which 10 percent of the gross receipts will be donated to the nursing home, as well.

Last year, Wagner raised \$10,000 through the raffle.

"As a woman of faith, I've always looked for ways to give back to the community. One day, I saw the Little Sisters begging at T-Bones, and I knew contributing was the right thing to do. I have a soft spot for seasoned seniors," said Wagner, 61, of Bradford Woods.

Tom Weir, owner of T-Bones Market, remembers the first time he was asked to help the Sisters.

"A customer asked me to donate a ham," he said.

Today, he donates 140 chicken breasts, 140 bone-in pork chops,

or enough 2-inch-thick cut chuck roasts to feed the nursing home residents. He does this once a month.

He also throws in some chocolate-covered pretzels and a couple chocolate-covered apples for the charming pair of Sisters who drive to Wexford to retrieve the meat.

"They always come on a Friday. Everyone enjoys it when they come. It's kind of an event," said Weir, 61, of Ohio Township. "Customers ask how they can help. It's fun. When you see the nursing home they run, it's really hard not to want to support them."

The nursing home houses 48 residents in a nursing facility and another 45 in independent apartments.

The home is divided into four 9,050-square-foot households, each equipped with a living room, full kitchen, dining room, laundry room and secured porch. Each household is shared by 12 residents who have their own private bedroom and bathroom.

Hairstylists visit three times a week. Doctors, dentists, optometrists, and podiatrists come once a month for appointments, and a physical therapy room allows nurses to help rehabilitate patients between visits.

A built-in theater provides movies and plays. A craft room, ceramic studio in the basement, and monthly painting classes offer a creative outlet or an opportunity to create items for the gift shop. An activity room is equipped with board games and a Wii gaming system.

"The most popular activity is bowling on the Wii," said Kathleen Bowser, development director of Little Sisters of the Poor. "The residents love it."

A few apartments are kept vacant so families can come visit their loved ones and stay on the premises for free.

"The Sisters don't want any

hurdles to keep families from spending time with their loved ones. These visits always give the residents such joy," Bowser said.

The home only accepts financially needy seniors over the age of 65. It is operated by 13 Sisters, ages 60 to 90-something, who live in the convent on the third floor.

"One of the nicest things I can say about this place is that it is home, not 'a home,'" 90-year-old resident Anne Brennen said. "Everything we need is here. There are activities every day. The Sisters devote their lives to caring for us."

On June 9, the residents participated in a Rock-a-Thon fundraiser, in which they rocked in their rocking chairs from 1 to 4 p.m. Thanks to individual and corporate sponsors, they raised \$25,000, which will be used to purchase new kitchen equipment.

"It feels good to help the Sisters," Weir said. "When you see people who have nothing and don't ask for much, it's far easier to give."

Laurie Rees is a Tribune-Review contributor.