

Knights, MR Foundation supports work of Sumner Special Housing

ANDY TELLI

Bob Johnson, a Knight of Columbus in Council 10010 at St. John Vianney Church in Gallatin, has volunteered to help others his whole life, including with Habitat for Humanity.

Having a brother with intellectual disabilities educated him about the needs of that population.

So when the late Carlton Russell of Sumner Special Housing Inc. was looking for someone in the mid-1990s to help the non-profit agency build a home for people with intellectual disabilities, Johnson was the perfect fit.

Since 1997, Johnson, currently the president of Sumner Special Housing, has overseen efforts to build four homes for people with intellectual disabilities in Sumner County using the model he learned working with Habitat for Humanity.

Some of the money Sumner Special Housing has used for the projects has come from the MR Foundation, supported by Knights of Columbus councils across Tennessee.

The MR Foundation supports charitable organizations that serve people with intellectual disabilities, including grants for housing, vehicles, activities and programs, and scholarships for people earning degrees to work with people with intellectual disabilities, explained John King, president of the MR Foundation and a Knight in Council 9317 at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Cordova.

Councils can designate half of the money they raise for the MR Foundation to be used for an agency in their area.

Since 1975, the MR Foundation has distributed more than \$7 million to support a wide range of agencies and services, King said.

The money comes from fundraisers hosted by Knights of Columbus councils throughout the state, particularly the familiar Tootsie Roll Drives, King said.

"Through council participation from Bristol to Memphis, from Chattanooga to Union City, it's through their generosity and their fundraising that they make this possible," King said.

Through the years, the MR Foundation has supported Sumner Special Housing's efforts to provide a safe, secure home for people with intellectual disabilities.

Sumner Special Housing bought its first home in Gallatin, which had room for up to eight residents, Johnson said. But the State of Tennessee changed its priorities away from placing people in larger group homes in favor of placing them in supported living arrangements where there are no more than three residents and a manager to oversee them in a home.

So Sumner Special Housing, using the model Johnson learned working with Habitat for Humanity, started building four-bedroom homes to house three residents and the house manager, he said. They have built two homes in

Portland, one in Gallatin and one in Bethpage, all in Sumner County.

Sumner Special Housing raises the money to build the homes before buying the materials and starting construction, Johnson said. "We're trying to maintain it so we're debt free," he said.

Each of the homes cost about \$170,000 to build, Johnson said. Most of the materials used are purchased at discounted costs, and Knights provide volunteer labor, he added.

"Our build schedule is a little bit longer than Habitat," which usually builds a home in four weeks, Johnson said. "We tend to do it over a six-week period" with volunteers working weekends and a few nights during the week.

"Our homes are very basic, but they're very functional as well," Johnson said. "We try to build them with the idea to make them as easy to maintain as possible."

Once construction is complete, Sumner Special Housing turns over the homes to Habilitation and Training Services in Gallatin, also known as HATS, to manage.

Besides providing someone to manage the house, HATS provides the residents transportation to a job, or employs them at its workshop in Gallatin doing work the agency contracts for with various companies, Johnson said. "That provides them meaningful work, and they get paid for what they do there."

Currently, all four houses are full,

Johnson said.

Sumner Special Housing continues to raise money to build a new home to meet the need for housing in Sumner County whenever it arises and to maintain the homes it already has built, Johnson said.

Much of that money has come from the Tootsie Roll Drives sponsored by the councils at Our Lady of the Lake and St. John Vianney over the years.

However, fewer and fewer stores allow the Knights to stand at their doors to take donations and hand out Tootsie Rolls, King said. So the MR Foundation is encouraging councils all over Tennessee to develop other ideas for raising funds, he said.

"The shift is starting to happen," King said, as councils have been hosting all kinds of dinners, barbecues, car shows and concerts. "Anything that you can think of that you can have fun doing and raise money is on the table."

His home council at St. Francis of Assisi put on a dinner theater with the choir from nearby St. Benedict High School, King said.

The MR Foundation is asking all councils across the state to put on a fundraising event in the first week of August leading up to the annual tax-free weekend, King said.

Councils "can do more than one event," King said. "The important thing is 100 percent participation of the councils" in fundraising for the foundation, he said. ♣

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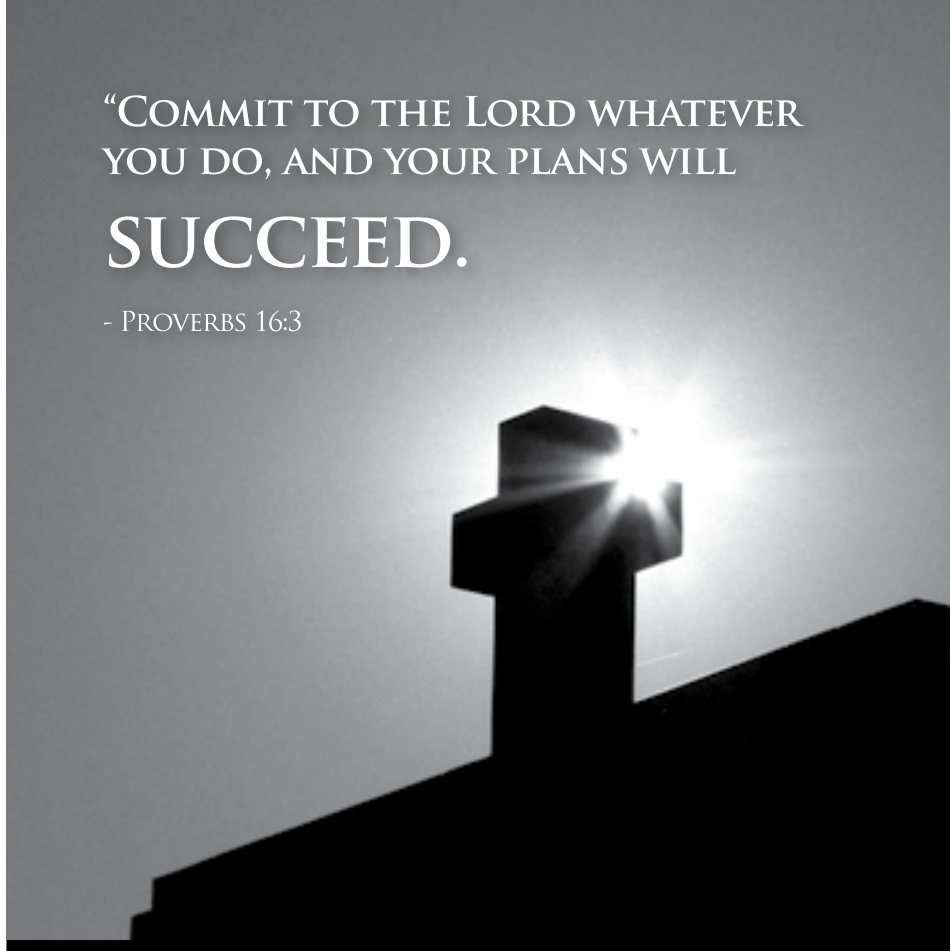
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