

Building on Charlie's Closet

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It was pretty hard to miss John McGuire the day Guilford Interfaith Ministries (GIM) hosted an open house of its new home and Charlie's Closet. Tagged with a big gold star, John was rounded up to say a few words about the beautiful new facility he's had such a hand in forging.

The two-building facility, tucked behind the Sagem Hollow complex on land given by Guilford Housing Authority (GHA), officially opened last month. John speaks with considerable pride about the slender house that holds GIM offices and the big red barn housing Charlie's Closet.

Of course, when it came time to speak at the September ceremony, in his humble way, John instead found someone else to praise.

"Charlie McGowan, who started Charlie's Closet, was here; so it was kind of neat that he could be here to see this and for me to be able to point him out to everyone," says John. In 1998, McGowan got the ball rolling on the medical equipment lending program that became Charlie's Closet. It loans donated equipment for a dollar and has held a special place in John's heart since he joined the GIM Board as Treasurer in 2000.

Back then, John, a mechanical engineer, had recently retired from a 40-year career with UI that began in engineering and ended with him as director of purchasing (he continued as a private consultant through 2002). His wife, Linda suggested John join her in volunteering with GIM. Already treasurer for North Guilford Congregational Church (a role he still holds) John agreed he might be a good fit for GIM. By 2002, "I kind of graduated from that to helping out with Charlie's Closet, mostly because I had a truck," says John, who also still serves as GIM treasurer.

Much like Charlie's Closet, John's truck has evolved to fill the need. Today, he drives a rig he equipped with an aftermarket hydraulic lift installed specifically to assist when delivering scooters and other large medical equipment. John makes deliveries just about every day of the week to homes stretching from New Haven County toward New London County.

John enjoys working with Charlie's Closet volunteers Gwen Fletcher and Dottie Volosin and GIM employees Joann Carson, Lori Wells, and Gail O'Leary. John's main mission for the past nine years has been delivering medical equipment, but that changed about three years ago to include the goal of building a new facility.

When GHA began planning Sagem's Hollow, a complex for seniors, it added space for the foundation of a barn to hold



Charlie's Closet. Then an old summer kitchen building was moved within the site and put next to the foundation to provide GIM office space. Of course, funding would be needed to create the entire facility.

"I volunteered to help out and I guess I just kept getting deeper," says John, whose background provided GIM with the experience not only to plan the facility, but to find funding. "With GIM not having a source of funds for the job, we had to do a lot of things based on donations."

John proved to be a master at both, helping bring in money without a major capital campaign and also generating donations and reduced-cost services. He also took on the job of overseeing construction. A hands-on guy, John completed a number of details himself, from installing a stone patio to digging an initial trench for underground phone wires, to spreading yards of donated loam and piecing together the intricate curve of a deck to meet a wheelchair ramp installed by an Eagle Scout.

Thanks to those efforts, John now volunteers at a new facility he literally had a hand in building. Connecting to the beautiful post-and-beam barn and neighboring two-story office space is a functional breezeway that acts as a staging area for drop-offs and pick-ups after hours.

"All of the help, from the people who work on the GIM board to the volunteers and the community who supported it and the businesses who contributed or reduced their costs, made this happen," he says.

Now that the building work is done, this active husband, father of three, and grandfather to eight says he plans to keep volunteering.

"As long as I'm physically able," John says, adding with a wink, "and mentally...I hope to be doing this for many years to come."

To learn more about Charlie's Closet and GIM, visit www.gimct.org or come out to support GIM programs including Octoberfest on Saturday, Oct. 24, Country Tavern, Long Hill Road (tickets, \$15, benefit GIM) or the Holiday Dinner on Tuesday, Dec. 8, Guilford Community Center (tickets, \$10, benefit GIM). For more information, call 203-453-8359.