

Tuesday October 18, 2011

## STOCKBRIDGE

Consider me a cynic. But if someone offers you a whole lot of money and asks for nothing in return, wouldn't you say, "What's the catch?" Which is what I did say more than once. But in fact, there was no catch when DaVita Inc., a leading provider of kidney care services based in Denver, chose Great Barrington as the location of its annual service day, and Railroad Street Youth Project as the recipient of a sum of money, no strings attached, to pay for something the organization needed.

As a member of the RSYP's development committee, I know there is a lot the organization needs -- funding for programs and projects as well as money to hire and pay staff to administer those programs and projects. But RSYP is dedicated to empowering young people and what they said they needed more than anything was a better Drop-in Center. The RSYP Drop-in Center is the Schneider Youth Building on Bridge Street in Great Barrington, and it had become care-worn over time. It was crowded with shabby furniture and make-shift offices; it felt dark and dreary. Everyone agreed, it needed to be a more welcoming place for the 14-25-year-olds who come for counseling, advocacy and referral services, socializing, meetings, activities, to do their homework and hang out.

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So with \$50,000 in donations: \$25,000 from DaVita and \$25,000 from the K.T. Community Foundation (a foundation started by DaVita Chairman and CEO Kent

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Thiry and his wife, Denise O'Leary, which benefits charitable programs), the remodeling of the Railroad Street Youth Project Drop-in Center began in mid-summer. Youth and adults from the community joined forces to design a new floor plan and remodel the space.

Then, on Sept. 18, more than 400 bike riders (DaVita employees, physician partners and patients) arrived in Great Barrington as part of a 250-mile tour from Great Barrington to Madison, Connecticut. They had each raised a minimum of \$750 to \$2,000 in donations to benefit The Kidney TRUST, a nonprofit organization with the mission to reduce the human and economic cost of chronic kidney disease across the United States and to "raise awareness for chronic kidney disease, which affects approximately 31 million American adults, 90 percent of whom are unaware they are suffering from it."

This was the fifth year of Tour DaVita, where participants begin a bike tour in a community somewhere in the United States, and offer assistance to various organizations on their "Village Service Day." In addition to working on the Drop-In Center, the cyclists helped with more than a dozen smaller service projects in the area, among them building a greenhouse out of recycled water bottles for the Flying Cloud Institute, cleaning toys for the Berkshire South Community Center and planting flowers around the property at Berkshire Meadows.

A few weeks after the renovation was completed, I went to a meeting at the Drop-in Center and was amazed at the transformation. "I'll never be cynical again," I said. The place is bright and cheerful with its new furniture, painted yellow walls, colorful rugs and lamps. There are office cubicles for staff and bigger windows that let more light in. Thanks to DaVita, there is an Internet cafe, entertainment lounge and homework resource center.

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RSYP Director, Brenda Barlow, says, "We are thrilled to have had this wonderful makeover for our Drop-In Center and feel it is a true 'game changer' for our organization. Over 200 youths have come through our doors since we re-opened on Sept. 19 -- now there is much work to be done to help them reach their fullest potential. When I look at our eight-person computer lab, I see the possibility of classes in music production, graphic design and GED/SAT preparation. When I look at the flat screen TV, I see youth digital photography exhibits and film debuts. We still need much support to turn these possibilities into reality and make the most of this wonderful community resource."

Now in its 12th year, RSYP serves a diverse community of young people and has earned the respect of local schools and businesses. Services and programs include a successful apprenticeship program where young people learn a trade and prepare for professional lives. A much-needed sex and health education program, created and taught by college students and others involved with RSYP, has become invaluable to local high schools.

Of course, gifts and community services like the ones DaVita offers are all too rare, and organizations like RSYP that need a great deal of support, are all too common. But generosity in any form is what keeps these organizations going and those of us who care about them from becoming cynical. Come by and see the "new" Drop-in Center on October 20, from 5-7 p.m. when RSYP is hosting an open house.

Michelle Gillett is a regular Eagle contributor.