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## Lamorinda groups help Grateful Gatherings tackle biggest project yet

By Pippa Fisher



A group of Miramonte volunteers help with a Grateful Gatherings event. Photo provided

Furnishing a 27-room facility is a huge undertaking, but that is exactly what the Oakland-based, nonprofit organization Grateful Gatherings is doing with help from many in the Lamorinda area. This particular project requires the help of all six Bay Area chapters, local groups and corporations, and volunteers as they help set up Claire's House, a community home offering love, hope, therapy and healing for children overcoming the trauma of sexual exploitation and trafficking. And Grateful Gatherings is still in need of some help.

Grateful Gatherings recognizes that when the homeless finally have a home, often they have nothing else. "Maybe an air mattress, if they're lucky. But not always even that," says Director of Programs and co-founder Chris Flitter. Grateful Gatherings collects donations, delivers and sets up for people transitioning out of homelessness.

The organization started small. In 2013 Executive Director Donna Wright Somerville sponsored a family in need over the holidays, providing gifts and food. She kept in touch with the family and when they were placed in an apartment a few months later but had no furnishings, Somerville sent emails out to 20 of her friends. She had their apartment furnished within four days.

Today Grateful Gatherings works on the same principle, except that now they have an email list of 2,500 active donors and sponsors. They are a registered nonprofit with six local chapters, including Lafayette and Orinda.

Whereas in the beginning, Flitter says, she would single-handedly rent a U-Haul truck for deliveries, since 2016 moving company Chipman Relocation and Logistics has sponsored them and sends a truck and movers. Describing this as a gift she says, "In 2015 we were helping 29 people. Chipman allowed us to grow. In 2017 we helped 85 people."

Both Somerville and Flitter have a background in television production, including HGTV. Flitter also worked at Shelter Inc. - one of the 15 agencies that Grateful Gatherings works with. Others include Save, Operation Dignity and Ruby's Place.

Flitter says the "gatherings" are exciting and heartwarming, noting that they always manage to gather everything on their list. She says each project starts with a drop-off of the donated items - a community affair - before the furniture is taken to the new home and set up by volunteers. She says it is as much about giving as receiving.

The Claire's House project, run by Catholic Charities of the East Bay, will be a little different, not least in terms of size. With 12 bedrooms, two living rooms, counseling rooms, a classroom, five bathrooms, kitchen, dining room and laundry room there is much to gather.

Currently Grateful Gatherings have some corporate sponsorship as well as local groups such as the Acalanes National Charity League and some individual Lamorinda families sponsoring rooms. At this point Grateful Gatherings mostly has its entire list filled; however, they are still in need of donations to raise funds for mattresses, which they always buy new, and volunteers to help.

According to CCEB Director of Communications Mary Kuhn, one of the biggest problems facing those trying to help sex trafficking survivors is the lack of supportive homes for healing. Claire's House provides the security, long-term care and intensive counseling necessary to help minors overcome their trauma. Claire's House has space for 12 girls, aged 12-17, and will be opening in late May. The home, currently being renovated, is located in Alameda County. For reasons of privacy, the exact location is not being given.

Those interested in donating money for mattresses or in other opportunities to help in the May 5 event should sign up on the Grateful Gatherings website at <https://gratefulgatherings.org/upcoming-gatherings/>.

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