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Declutter and help someone in need, all at the same time

By Diane Claytor



Moraga resident Craig (middle) and Easten Means drop off at the Moraga Donation Center with Goodwill employee Emile Andraed. Photo Andy Scheck

We all do it. The calendar changes from one year to the next and we make lists of all the things we're going to change, all the ways we're going to improve ourselves and our lives. Lose weight. Exercise more. Declutter the house. Clean the garage. Stop yelling at the kids. The lists can be endless. And often times, long forgotten by the end of January.

Although resolutions must be made and kept (or broken) by each individual, we can offer a suggestion on how to make at least one of them a little easier to keep. Cleaning, decluttering, de-junking - whatever you call it - is as easy as driving to Moraga's Rheem Shopping Center, dropping off bags of useable but no longer-needed items at the Goodwill Donation Center and driving back, knowing your house is neater and you're helping change the lives of people in our own community who may have encountered any number of challenges.

The Moraga Donation Center is part of Goodwill Industries of the Greater East Bay, an independently

owned, not-for-profit organization consisting of one donation center, two distribution centers and 28 stores throughout Contra Costa, Alameda and Solano counties.

According to Mike Keenan, president and CEO of Goodwill of the Greater East Bay, the organization's primary mission is to turn donations into jobs, offering opportunities to many individuals he calls "second chancers," those who have faced significant barriers and challenges in the past. This can include people with criminal records, previous addiction problems, generational poverty, job loss or disabilities. "We use the money earned by selling donations to hire employees to work in our stores and distribution centers," Keenan explained. "We teach them skills, train them, give them a job and a paycheck which, in turn, gives them self-confidence and often the impetus to continue improving themselves. We give them purpose and opportunity. It's a win-win."

Keenan went on to note that many of the leaders in the organization have come up through the ranks. As he said, "Who better to understand how it feels to need help or how to train someone so they, too, can follow a path to success?" The organization also offers a workforce development program, which includes job readiness training, at its four career service centers, in addition to their Goodwill Academy, which is a vocational education program tailored to help those with little work experience.

The Moraga Donation Center is quite busy, Keenan said, and "candidly, the quality of donations is very high." The Center, on average, takes in approximately 100 donations every day - that's 100 individuals bringing in anywhere from one item to dozens of items. And, according to Manager Gracinda Fernandes, Saturdays and Sundays average up to 150 donations each day. "We've received some incredible donations, including new Coach bags and a mink coat," Fernandes said. She recalled once receiving 14 new iPod Shuffles and recently, 10 brand new coffee pots. "The donor said he had purchased the coffee pots as gifts then changed his mind about giving them so decided to donate them to Goodwill."

The process is simple. Donations come in, get sorted into bins according to category. Trucks come every morning and pick up 12 to 15 full bins which are taken to various stores for further sorting, pricing and then put on the floor for sale. Kennan described their rotational program: items are on sale for five weeks, then discounted by 50%. If they still don't sell, they are sent to Goodwill's outlet store, where they are sold by the pound. Any items remaining are sold to a salvage company. The higher-end, newer donations - such as those Coach purses - take a different path: they are sent to an e-commerce site where they are categorized, photographed and placed on the shopgoodwill.com website.

"One of the things people don't realize about Goodwill," Keenan explained, "is that we really are a sustainability company. First we try to sell, which is, of course, the best form of recycling there is. If that doesn't work, we salvage; those items are generally sent to other countries. We do not add to the landfill," he emphasized. This year alone, Keenan reported, Goodwill of the Greater East Bay has kept 10 million pounds of goods from reaching the landfill.

So those plates you no longer need, the old suitcases that were recently replaced by new luggage, the clothes that no longer fit and the toys that are suddenly too young for the kids can all find a new home

while offering an improved life for someone in need.



Mike Keenan (far left), president/CEO of Goodwill of the Greater East Bay, and his Moraga Donation Center team: (from left) McKenna Martin, Vicki Akia, Gracinda Fernandes and Kyle Hinds Photo Diane Claytor

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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