

# Hands of Hope:

## Reaching Out to the Homeless with Love and Support

**Y**ou've seen them: weathered faces lined with care, holding their cardboard signs by the side of the road, begging for help. You're waiting for the light to turn green and try to avoid their stare. What to do?

Deacon Gene Messer and his wife Judi have the answer: Hands of Hope care packages.

Judi, a registered nurse, has been helping the homeless since 2006 and knows that people on the streets are often in need of basic items the rest of us might take for granted. Nail clippers, clean socks, toothbrushes and toothpaste, lip balm and travel-sized shampoo are a few of the items tucked inside the care packages Judi designed.

With donations from NextCare Urgent Care and Dr. Keith Farr, the Messers recruited teenagers from Holy Cross Parish's Life Teen youth program to assemble 500 of the care packages. In February, the Messers spoke at all the Masses, telling Holy Cross parishioners about the new project, part of the parish's ongoing efforts to assist the homeless. They stood at a table afterward, distributing the packages to parishioners.

"What I wanted with these packages is for families to take a sample home and to make them at home as a family project so that they have something to hand out to people," Judi said. "They can keep these in their car."

"This has been one of the biggest successes at the parish that I've seen," Gene said. "People were so excited about it," Judi said. "They just embraced the idea."

### Spreading the Word

The parish welcomes many winter visitors who have since taken the idea back to their

home states. Hands of Hope care packages have also been adopted by nearby parishes and introduced at the Diocese of Phoenix's Kino Institute.

Kathleen Evans, a parishioner at Holy Cross who works at Seton Catholic Preparatory in Chandler, was inspired by the Messers' effort to help the homeless.

"When they introduced the project, I was very moved," Evans said. "We have a generous community here at Seton and I think it would be a very good service project for our students here in addition to the service they already do at Paz de Cristo and St. Vincent de Paul."

On any given night, there are as many as 27,000 homeless in Arizona. Judi sees many of them at the four locations where she volunteers as a nurse. She keeps a small warehouse of vital supplies in the back of her Jeep. It's a mobile clinic of sorts, offering hemorrhoid ointment, tweezers, bandages, soap, and clean socks.

Rather than cash, the Hands of Hope care packages offer concrete help such as bus passes, \$5 gift cards for fast food restaurants, water bottles, and granola bars. The addresses of places in town where free meals, food boxes, and other items are dis-



Judi Messer's Jeep houses a storehouse of necessities she hands out to the needy in the care packages she designs as part of the Hands of Hope project. (Joyce Coronel/Catholic Sun)

tributed are included on a card inside the package.

The Messers say they want participants in the Hands of Hope project to say something simple when offering the care packages: "Here's something I hope will help. I'll be praying for you."

The flyers the Messers distributed at Holy Cross Parish have made their way across the Valley, into other states and even Canada. Along with suggested items for the care packages, the flyer states that motorists could carry water bottles or sports drinks in their cars to give to the homeless.

"I can really see God in the homeless," Judi said. "I don't care what they smell like, what they look like, or what they're wearing... I don't care because I am just doing the job I'm meant to do. I think my whole life I've been training for this." †

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