



Charity could begin at home

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[Buy this photo](#) Diane Ballweg of Madison, who is the chair of Porchlight's Madison Cares fund-raising program, stands alongside her son, Ben, near the Porchlight offices on Brooks Street. Michelle Stocker -- Capital Times

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When word got out at Edgewood High School that Diane Ballweg was planning a trip to Haiti over spring break to help build homes for that devastated country's rural poor, she says she was almost instantly overwhelmed by those wanting to lend a hand.

"All of a sudden I was hearing from teachers and parents and students and even other schools all trying to figure out how they could raise money or supplies for Haiti," says Ballweg, the school's aviation instructor. She plans to travel to Haiti March 25 with her adult son, Ben Ballweg, through an

organization called Haiti Outreach.

It's been more than six weeks since the Haiti earthquake, and it's still not uncommon to hear about a group or organization raising money or collecting supplies for the ravaged Caribbean country. And while Ballweg agrees that Haiti still needs all the help it can get, she wishes more people would open their eyes to the plight of those in our proverbial back yard.

"So I started telling people, 'It's true, Haiti is in desperate need right now, but if you want to do something closer to home, on an ongoing basis, and help people whose lives are just as devastated, let me tell you about Porchlight,'" says Ballweg, who is chair of Porchlight's Madison Cares campaign to raise \$3.5 million to build housing and provide services for homeless people suffering from mental illness in the community.

Porchlight is a volunteer-intensive agency that is working to decrease the homeless population by providing housing and support services to help those in need to reshape their lives. The local non-profit is the largest supplier of low-cost housing in Dane County, with some 230 units at 21 locations in the area.

The Madison Cares campaign had already raised nearly \$2.1 million to construct two new buildings at 4002 Nakoosa Trail on Madison's east side, and this weekend is kicking off the public portion of its fundraising drive. Porchlight launched a Madison Cares website and announced a unique "Community Read" program designed to get people to discover and discuss "The Soloist," a true story by Steve Lopez that examines the bond between a reporter and a mentally ill, homeless, classically trained musician in Los Angeles.

"I can't deny that Haiti is a tremendous need," says Steve Schooler, Porchlight's executive director. "What's going on in our community, it's more of a quiet, ongoing need that persists, and it's difficult to get publicity for that because the message isn't as newsworthy as what is taking place in Haiti. The challenge for us is that we're a local organization, so almost all of our support comes from local businesses and people. We don't have a national market with national TV coverage to tell people what we do or how we help people. Frankly, that makes things a bit more challenging for us and we count on local support."

New Safe Haven facilities planned

Although Madison has a reputation as a relatively affluent area, the number of poor calling this community home is growing, with roughly one in six residents living in poverty.

According to Porchlight, about 3,500 Madison residents are homeless at some point each year, with a shortage of affordable housing, mental illness, inadequate job skills and substance abuse as leading factors in one ending up on the street.

"We as a society have, over the last 50 years, taken people who need help out of institutions, and at

the same time have provided no support services or housing for them in the community," says Schooler. "Therefore, they end up on the streets and we trip over them and fall over them and they're in our way, yet we haven't really stopped to do much to help them."

Porchlight's plan to address these growing problems includes expanding permanent housing with support services for those suffering from mental illness. If its Madison Cares campaign is a success, Porchlight will build two new buildings, with a total of 38 units, within the next three years.

One building will have 14 single-occupancy units that include a communal kitchen and space for the Safe Haven program, which provides temporary, transitional housing and support services for homeless men and women with mental illness. This program offers a psychiatric clinic as well as meals, job training and referrals to community agencies. The Safe Haven program currently is renting space in an inadequate facility that can't meet the program's increasing needs.

It's expected that many of these units will go to military veterans suffering from traumatic stress disorders. "We keep hearing that we should honor our veterans who have given so much to their country," says Ballweg, who made a significant personal donation to the fundraising campaign in its early stages to get the project rolling. "Well, put your money where your mouth is."

Porchlight reports that 13 percent of the homeless in Madison are veterans, with 45 percent of those suffering from mental illness. With help, the organization says most people with mental illnesses get better and many recover completely.

"All the research has shown that housing with intensive services is the way to get people off the street and get them stable," says Katherine Davey, Porchlight's resource development director.

The second building is to include 24 units of efficiency apartments that can provide permanent housing for homeless individuals.

"The idea is you graduate from the first building into the second building, instead of just being thrown out into society," says Ballweg. "People who are having success can serve as mentors to people in the first building. Porchlight has this system down where they know how to help people get jobs and their lives back."

The project's total cost is \$3.5 million, which includes \$500,000 for an endowment designed to provide funding for annual maintenance and programs. The City of Madison provided the land -- assessed at \$425,000 -- for this project, along with \$312,500 in Community Development Block Grant funds.

So despite a sluggish economy that has made many groups cancel their capital campaigns, Porchlight is pushing ahead with its Madison Cares fundraising efforts. It hopes to have the \$3.5 million raised by the fall, with plans to break ground in early 2012.

"When we first started moving forward with this campaign, people discouraged us," says Davey.

"With the economy, it is a bit tricky. But it's doable. These are people who are truly the poorest of the poor and who really need our support."

'Soloist' a springboard for discussion

In an effort to raise awareness of homelessness and mental health issues, Porchlight and the Madison Public Library are teaming up to offer a Community Read of "The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship and the Redemptive Power of Music."

In addition to being able to check out the individual book, it also will be available in book discussion kits assembled by the library system. Many of the local library branches also will be hosting community discussion groups to further examine the book and the topics of homelessness and mental health. In all, the library system has about 110 books available.

As an added bonus, Porchlight has posted a Community Read Toolkit that features book club questions, reviews of the book and facts about mental health and homelessness.

"I think the conversation will really be enhanced because of Porchlight's involvement," says Liz Amundson, a reference librarian with the Madison Public Library who helped coordinate this community read event. "So while I can talk about the writing and groups can talk about our emotional connection to the book and a shared experience, Porchlight brings in knowledge about the specifics of homelessness and mental illness that will help book groups engage with this topic in a home-grown way."

Also, DVDs of "The Soloist" movie starring Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx also are available through the library -- although the waiting list currently is 250 people for the nearly 50 copies of the DVD. The library also plans a free public showing of the movie this spring.

Overall, the idea is to get people talking, and hopefully paying more attention, to the issues of homelessness and mental illness, and to shine a spotlight on those in the greatest need of help close to home.

When raising funds for the Madison Cares campaign, Ballweg sometimes tells a story of the building of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris.

"Someone asks two workers what they are doing, and they say, 'Cutting stones,' " relates Ballweg. "The next group of workers is asked the same question and say, 'We're building a cathedral.' And two more are asked the same question and they say, 'We're saving souls.' "

Says Ballweg: "And that's truly how I feel about Porchlight. Porchlight doesn't cut stones or just build buildings, they are saving souls, helping people get off the streets, get jobs and get back on their feet. There are people in Haiti who need our help. But, man, I know people around here who are really struggling. That's a message that needs to get out."

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