

## A Retail Mission

By Julie Rossman

Lois Solberg is a self-described catalyst. She likes to start things. The list of projects she has gotten off the ground includes the Racine Arts Council, Racine Artists Gallery and Main Gallery in Racine. She was also part of the committee that started the Bull Fine Arts School in Racine.

Her latest project is Habitat ReStore, a resale shop stocked by donations and staffed by volunteers, with proceeds going directly to Racine's Habitat for Humanity.

"I like starting things," Solberg said. "I like proving it can be done."

Solberg was a member of Racine's Habitat for Humanity Board of Directors for 18 years. There are a number of ReStore locations throughout the state, but when the idea of a Racine store came up, board members were skeptical, saying there was no one to be in charge, no space and no staff. Solberg said she quickly replied, "I think I can do that."

She started with nothing; no business plan, no money, no place for a store. Through networking with acquaintances, sometimes at unlikely places - like her grandson's soccer game, she was able to secure 5800 square feet of space rent free for a year in the Kranz Building on Dekoven Avenue. She applied for a grant so she could buy a cash register, solicited for donations and recruited volunteers. They moved into the store in January of 2007, just six months after she began.

Since then, the store has expanded three times and now encompasses 15,400 square feet of everything, *including* the kitchen sink. There's cabinets, countertops, sinks and toilets. There's doors, windows, millwork and lumber. There's also furniture, flooring, lighting, power tools and hardware. The store also now accepts items for electronic recycling including: TV's and monitors, computers / laptops and parts, peripherals, printers, stereos, video and audio recorders, telephones, typewriters, video game consoles and more. Electronics must be dropped off at the store during store hours.

All items are gently used or new goods from retailers, contractors and home owners. And every donation has come from word of mouth. No money has ever been spent on advertising, and very little money is spent on staff.

So just how did Habitat ReStore go from nothing, to a success story? In the early stages, Lois went out to make presentations to many local rotary groups, but she didn't do it alone.

At the time, she was watching her nine-year-old grandson, Mark Wilson. He asked if he could be part of the planning committee and she gladly accepted his help. He sat in on committee meetings and he traveled with his Grandmother to help make presentations, soliciting donations on behalf of the store.

Mark is now a teenager and still volunteers regularly. "We need to teach the younger generation how to do this," Solberg said. "It's refreshing to have younger kids around."

At times, the enormity of the project weighed on Solberg but she relied on her faith, and prayer, to help her through. Help came in the form of Jim Kitchak of Racine, who worked early on as Solberg's volunteer co-manager for several years. About three months after the store opened, Solberg was again feeling overwhelmed and asked the Lord for help. "The next day at church someone came up to ask me about the store and wanted to help," she said. Since then, he has done all the financials for ReStore.

Solberg did visit three other ReStore locations in Wisconsin in preparation for opening the Racine store, but admits she had no real business plan. "I fly by the seat of my pants," she

said. "It's the spirit that's guiding us - that's what makes it happen."

Solberg is not very comfortable taking credit for the store's success, but is quick to recognize the regular group of about 30 - 35 people who volunteer their time. "We're really blessed," she said.

Habitat ReStore's volunteers range in age from 16 - 93. "There's no end to the wonderful people that make this happen!" she added.

Since the store opened, Solberg says more than one million pounds of material has been kept out of the landfill. In addition, the store is always recycling any items that can't be sold.

Solberg has always felt strongly about the mission of Habitat for Humanity. In the last 23 years, the organization has built or rehabilitated 66 homes in Racine. After just one year of revenue from the store, there was enough money to purchase materials for two of those new homes.

Solberg says supporting Habitat ReStore is a great way to support the community. "What a wonderful way to support habitat and add to their financial stream," she said.

### **Habitat ReStore Racine**

Location: 2302 DeKoven Ave, in the NW Corner of the Kranz Bldg.

Store Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday

9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday

Phone: 262-898-2929 (call for further information about accepted donations.)

