

Sexton: Helping hands extended to lifelong giver

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Marty Levin

Levin points out some of the additions to his kitchen, including new flooring, counters, cabinets, appliances and paint. “It really got to me ... it brought tears to my eyes, I can tell you that,” he says.

Marty Levin has a simple explanation for the all the hours he’s put in doing volunteer work over the past 25 or so years.

“I like to stay busy,” he said with a slight shrug.

Busy, you say? Levin has turned up so often and so regularly at the Shepherd’s Center to help with its massive used book sale — it’s a year-round operation — that he has his own key to the place. He’s also logged considerable time helping at the Salvation Army and the Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina.

“He’s here before the office even opens working with other volunteers,” said Linda Lewis, the associate executive director of the Shepherd’s Center, an interfaith ministry that aims to promote successful aging. “When the book sale is on, he’s there from start to finish and at 91, that’s pretty amazing.”

Suffice it to say, Marty Levin is a giver. He’s one of those generous souls who silently enriches the community and has never once asked, nor expected, a thing in return — even when he clearly needed a helping hand.

Sometimes, though, those things have a way of working themselves out. Good things can happen to good people.

Loving the work

I found Marty Levin sitting quietly in a modest easy chair one morning last week before the Shepherd’s Center got rolling for the day.

He was planning on spending a chunk of his Thursday sorting and pricing mountains of books stacked in a large room at the center. The annual sale isn’t scheduled for another six months, but there’s plenty to do. And Levin intends to do his share.

He answers questions about his volunteer work in a matter-of-fact manner. He loves doing it, but you get the feeling he’s not all that comfortable talking about it for publication because it might come off as too showy. He’d just as soon ask questions as answer them.

“I just stay until I feel like leaving,” he said. “It depends on what else I have to do and how I feel, I guess.”

Lewis confirmed that’s his way, laughing softly as she noted that “he’s pretty eccentric and has his own way of doing things.”

“He’s never been one to ask for help or even indicate that he has any needs himself,” she said.

Though she was talking about his volunteer work, Lewis might well have been talking about Levin’s views on life.

As it turned out, Levin did have some rather glaring needs. The house he’s lived in since 1975 had fallen into some disrepair. The roof, ceilings and floors had worn out, the maintenance having become overwhelming for a man who’ll be 92 in January.

And no one, except Levin and the adult daughter he shares it with, knew the first thing about it until a couple months ago.

Someone at the Shepherd's Center found out by chance and set in motion a series of amazing acts of generosity.

"We did send one of our home repair folks, a volunteer who discovered that it was beyond some minor home repairs," Lewis said.

Serving his country

Long before Levin retired and devoted large chunks of his life to volunteer work, he served in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II.

He was assigned to the 325th Air Division to work in the world's largest photography lab in England, helping develop aerial photos that provided intelligence to bombers in the air and generals on the ground.

Aerial photography reconnaissance was used in many of the war's European battles, including the Battle of the Bulge and Operation Market Garden.

"Of all the generals, Patton used them the most," Levin said.

As the Allies advanced across Germany, the lab and its workers moved with them to help with aerial maps of Europe.

Levin liked the work and considered making a career out of the military, but the Air Corps couldn't guarantee him his wishes to serve time overseas. "I'd been in England and Germany for three years, so I was kind of used to it," Levin said.

Instead, he came home and enrolled at N.C. State. He had always had an interest in floriculture, so it seemed natural to study at State's agriculture program.

"I was interested in flowers, but back then you had to take all the agriculture (courses) and I didn't care anything about cows and sheep."

So he left school and started working in a greenhouse in Greensboro, the launch of his career running wholesale flower shops.

It was after his retirement, though, when he found his true calling in volunteering.

"When I was working, there was no time for it," he said. "When I stopped, I had the time. I was always interested in it."

Deeply grateful

As we know now, that interest eventually landed him at the Shepherd's Center. And it was through that work that his admirers started looking into helping him once they learned his house could use some attention.

While making plans, somebody at the center remembered that Levin is a World War II veteran, and someone else reached out to an organization called Purple Heart Homes, a group based in Statesville which, as its name implies, strives to help veterans with housing needs.

"We don't build new homes," said Brian Sowers, who helps run a chapter in Greensboro that serves Guilford and surrounding counties. "For us, it's about improving existing homes with things like accessibility and safety."

(Four organizations really make the thing go: Home Depot, HAECO (an aviation maintenance company formerly known as Timco), the Crescent Rotary Club in Greensboro and the Wet 'n Wild Emerald Point water-theme park.)

Volunteers visited Levin's home, and came away with a lengthy to do list: new roof, new floor, new ceilings, new cabinets and countertops and remodeling the kitchen and bathroom.

"We pretty much did an overhaul of his house," Sowers said. "In Marty's case, considering he's a World War II veteran and what he's done for other people, from the standpoint of who he is ... this was one of our best and most rewarding projects."

Some 50 volunteers put in between 700 and 800 hours the week of Veterans Day and totally transformed Levin's house.

"New cabinets, new stove, new refrigerator, new ceiling," Levin said. "It really got to me ... it brought tears to my eyes, I can tell you that. I'm not used to people doing things for me."

Levin plans to spend his Thanksgiving with friends in Gastonia, a trip he looks forward to making, and eating "too much turkey and stuffing."

When the long holiday weekend ends, he'll be right back to his volunteer work, same as he always does.

"I try to stay busy," he said. "I do it just for the need of it. Somebody needs to do it. As long as I'm able, I'm going to do it."