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Hampton Bays man helps comfort senior citizens with special jewelry

By Brian Bossetta



When he was a boy, Bob Costanzo of Hampton Bays saw a television production of "The Last Leaf," based on the classic O. Henry short story about a struggling artist in Greenwich Village who falls ill one winter and comes to believe that she will die when the last leaf outside her window falls. In an act of love, an elderly artist who lives in the same building paints a leaf on the sick woman's wall so that "the last leaf" will never fall.

Now 66, Mr. Costanzo is still inspired by that story and said he uses it to fuel what is now his life's work: helping senior citizens.

In 2002, Mr. Costanzo left a successful career as an engineer to launch Be Safe At Home, Inc., a not-for-profit in Cutchogue dedicated to helping the elderly "live comfortably and independently at home." The philanthropic group is affiliated with United Yokefellow Ministry, which is housed in the First Parish Church in Riverhead, and recently began an initiative to help hundreds of low-income senior citizens in Southampton get medical alert bracelets.

Not long ago, Mr. Costanzo received a \$25,000 donation from Carl Darenberg, the manager of Montauk Marine in Montauk. According to Mr. Darenberg, a Southampton resident who wished to remain anonymous donated his boat to Montauk Marine so that proceeds from its sale would go directly to aiding Southampton's elderly.

"Being able to help Bob brings me a great deal of personal satisfaction," Mr. Darenberg said. "He's really dedicated to a good cause."

Mr. Costanzo said the money would benefit about 500 senior citizens. The bracelets, which allow wearers to alert emergency responders if they fall, become ill, or if there is a fire or other emergency in their home, cost \$40 a month to activate. Be Safe At Home will pick-up some or all of the cost, depending on individual need, Mr. Costanzo said.

An inability to pay would not prevent seniors from getting the service, he stressed.

Mr. Costanzo said he would be distributing the bracelets at the Southampton Town Senior Center in Hampton Bays and through the referral of seniors already using the service.

According to Mr. Costanzo, the majority of accidental deaths of those age 65 and over are due to falls in the home or not being able to report fires.

One of Mr. Costanzo's customers, 81-year-old Joyce, who lives alone in Catholic Charities-sponsored housing in Hampton Bays and asked that her last name not be published, said the bracelet has been a lifesaver.

"I don't know how I ever lived without it," she said, adding that the bracelet allows her to live alone and with

much less anxiety.

What is most important to Mr. Costanzo is the sense of not being alone that the bracelets provide senior citizens such as Joyce. He thinks that the bracelets offer comfort and allows seniors to remain in the familiar environment of their homes and to age safely and with dignity.

Since January, Joyce has had to activate her bracelet four times due to falls, adding that emergency responders were at her door within minutes. "I'd be lost without it," she said.

Mr. Costanzo said that for many senior citizens on Long Island, the sunset of their lives are spent in isolation and that is what really pushes him to help as many in need as possible.

"It's really a sin that so many of our seniors live alone," he said, adding that, according to numbers from the 2000 Census, some 76,000 elderly over the age of 75 live alone on an income of roughly \$9,000 a year. "These seniors can't afford anything and go for weeks without even a phone call."

But for all he does to help senior citizens, Mr. Costanzo said it is nothing compared to what he gets back from them in return.

"I get the greatest satisfaction, the greatest thrill just being around the seniors," he said. "It's the richest thing I get out of it. The sheer joy from what I do every day makes me feel young and alive, and I will do this work for the rest of my life."

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