

Round, Round, I Get Around, Sojourners Magazine-July-August 2002

Every once in a while, a truly brilliant idea comes along: the wheel, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, Cannoli...you get the idea." So say Tom and Ray of NPR's "Car Talk" radio program about the Good News Garages in Vermont and Massachusetts. Following the example of the folks in New England, people in Charleston, West Virginia, have established their own Good News Mountaineer Garage.

The agenda is simple. They fix cars and give them away. As Tom and Ray joke: "Not a good business plan!" Unless one is in the business of helping move folks from welfare to work.

"People want to help others-I believe it is a part of our basic nature," said the program's executive director, Barbara Bayes, who grew up in an impoverished area of eastern Kentucky, "and this program addresses the most difficult barrier for poor people in rural areas" in their efforts to break their cycle of poverty.

"In West Virginia, one out of four low-income people listed lack of transportation as the main problem in maintaining employment or getting to job training," said Bayes, citing the West Virginia Research Task Force on Welfare Reform. It was to deal with that problem that the Good News Mountaineer Garage was developed by the West Virginia Council of Churches, the state Department of Health and Human Resources, the Bureau of Family and Children, and the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

The garage, which was founded in 1999, serves Kanawha and Lincoln counties. Lincoln county has no public transportation. Kanawha, which includes the state capital of Charleston, has a limited amount.

People living along the public transportation routes are less likely to receive a car from the program, because the group's leaders don't want to discourage the use of public transportation.

However, as outreach coordinator Arla Ralston explained, sometimes even having access to public transportation is no panacea to problems of mobility. Latanya Davis, for example, had to take eight buses, riding three to four hours, in order to take her 20-month-old child to daycare and get to her job and back each day. Davis received a car from the Mountaineer Garage. "I am truly blessed!" said Davis. "From what I've been through to where I am now is such a huge difference! We had to leave our home at six in the morning and didn't return home until almost eight at night. Now so much weight has been lifted off me, and I don't have to plan my life around the bus schedule."

IN MOST CAR-DONATION programs, people give their old cars to charity and the charity turns them over for auction. The charities usually receive a small percentage of the auction price to support their program work.

The Mountaineer Garage is different. The program takes in cars and repairs them for use by folks who are scattered throughout the hills and hollows where the buses don't run. So far the garage has turned over 69 cars out of 100 received. Some cars cannot be repaired in a cost-efficient manner. There is a transportation allowance of \$1,500 available to recipients and vehicles are repaired out of that fund.

"We try very hard not to use the full allowance so they will have money left for maintenance, hopefully for two years," Bayes said. "It generally takes two years for people to get on their feet, and we strive to provide cars that will last that long. We also take donations for a repair fund for those who don't have any repair money left."

Nathan Wilson was executive director of the West Virginia Council of Churches when the idea for the Mountaineer Garage was formulated and put into motion. "This program demonstrates an effective partnership among public and private funders and a broad coalition of concerned groups, all working together," Wilson said.

It's also a "win-win-win" situation, said Wilson, now director of communication and public policy for Call to Renewal. "Donors of vehicles win by knowing they are helping fellow West Virginians with a very real need, and they can claim federal and state tax deductions. Mechanic apprentices-often themselves welfare recipients-win by learning useful employable skills. And recipients of the vehicles win by having reliable transportation to go to work, visit friends and family, shop at the local stores, or attend religious and social functions."

And that's good news for everyone.

Larry Bellinger is advertising manager for Sojourners.