

GOOD TO GIVE

HELPING VETERANS — JUST START; THE IMPACT WILL GROW!

Ann King-Smith, an Auxiliary member since 2008, realized this just a few years ago: It can be the simple things that change lives – including your own. That's how Ann feels about a group of homeless veterans she now considers family. Some even call her "Mom."

The journey from strangers to family started just two years ago in July 2013, after Auxiliary Unit 163 in Melbourne, Fla., collected more than 500 coats and jackets for homeless veterans. But something nagged at Ann when she went to bed one night. "I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep," she recalled. "I kept thinking about what would happen if the coats got worn and dirty. Would they be thrown away and then we'd have to start again and again?"

That was the seed that planted Project Suds, an organization that started out by providing laundry services to homeless veterans but then expanded to meet other needs. It has won awards and national media attention. Here Ann, who will be Membership chairman of her unit, shares a few insights on how to start a project that fulfills ALA's mission to honor and support veterans.

1. Get started. Sometimes we can plan so much that an idea never gets off the ground. It's important to take action, Ann said. After making a few phone calls, she realized no one in her community was providing laundry services for homeless veterans. She grabbed a Tide container, taped a homemade sign to it that read "Project Suds," and took it to an Auxiliary meeting to collect quarters. That's how Project Suds got started.

2. Find partners outside of the ALA. Ann found a laundromat close to the woods where the veterans lived. The owner was very receptive to Project Suds and offered to serve coffee to vets



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Ann King-Smith (green shirt; top left) started Project Suds after her unit had a coat drive for veterans. Every week, the group welcomes veterans (and sometimes their dogs) at a laundromat for laundry, coffee, food and prayer.

while they did their laundry. Later, Ann found restaurants willing to serve free breakfast. Project Suds now has a waiting list of restaurants wanting to provide breakfast.

3. Promote it. Auxiliary members hung Project Suds posters at soup kitchens, libraries, centers, and churches that serve homeless people.

4. Ask for donations. Keep it simple. With Project Suds, Auxiliary members are simply asking for quarters and laundry detergent.

5. Be a friend. "Some ladies just come and sit there," Ann said. "The guys are able to sit down and talk to them about the problems they're having. They have someone who listens and someone who cares." Auxiliary Unit 163 also takes the veterans out on special outings, including to dinner at their Legion post and to local baseball games.

6. Expand services. ALA members offered other services once they better understood the veterans' needs. They helped several veterans get permanent housing through HUD and the VA. Ann also sought free medical services, including surgery, for Rosie, the canine companion of one of the veterans. That led to another program, in which

veterinarians provide free care for pets of homeless and low-income veterans. A salon offers haircuts to veterans once a month. "One thing leads to another good thing," Ann said.

7. Get excited. It may seem like a simple thing, but show your enthusiasm. "If we're not smiling, we can't expect anyone else to be excited," Ann said. "At that little laundromat, we're all excited." That enthusiasm has led to nonmembers volunteering which, in turn, opens up the opportunity for members to share about the benefits of the Auxiliary.

8. Consider 501(c)(3) status. To expand upon Project Suds, which also has been adopted by other Auxiliary units, Ann applied for 501(c)(3) status, which allows the group to be tax-exempt. More companies are willing to donate as a result. Barbara Stoffer, past department chairman in Charleston, S.C., is a board member for Project Suds. "I don't believe our veterans should be homeless," she said. "They fought for us, yet they come back here and our government doesn't treat them right." She said it is important to make a difference in their lives.

You can learn more about Project Suds America Inc. on its Facebook page.