

Between a sock and a hard place

At least once a week, Stephen Cleary sets out in his 1998 black Jeep Cherokee to cruise the streets of Baltimore City.

Cleary bought it used two years ago, and replaced the sagging interior roof with red buffalo plaid. Hockey jerseys serve as seat covers. The Jeep mobilizes his ministry, Threaded Cross, which provides clean socks to those in need.

As his typical route made its way around M&T Bank Stadium March 12, some recognized his Jeep and came over with a smile; new faces were equally happy to receive the socks. All were appreciative; most shared a smile.

“Want a pair of socks?” Cleary queried as he leaned out the window.

“Yessir,” one man replied.

Near the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. and Washington boulevards, a man named Mike – better known to his friends as “Papa Smurf” – accepted the donation and said, “I think it’s cool. I needed a pair of socks.”

Cleary founded Threaded Cross 10 years ago after recognizing the need when volunteering with his parish, Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville, at monthly dinners at St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore. He estimates that he since has given out 50,000 pairs of socks.

The outreach was right up his alley.

After working for a snowboard company in Vermont, in 2004 Cleary founded and led Eesa, a company focused on socks for skiers and snowboarders. In 2009, he became Under Armour’s director of accessories and licensing, and moved his family to Maryland.

For every dollar donated, Cleary can supply those in need with a pair of new white crew socks. That covers the cost of the socks, which Cleary gets from a Christian vendor in Alabama, and operating expenses.

While Cleary works both as a consultant and for a mobile device repair business, Threaded Cross has been a full-time mission for he and his wife, Roseann, since October 2018.

“Instead of giving (people asking for money) a buck, I give them a pair of socks,” Cleary said of what he calls “Joy-Ride-A-Longs.” “I love meeting people. ... Wherever people are in their lives, I just like talking to people – even if they don’t like talking to me.”

According to the Office of the Mayor, approximately 2,500 men, women and children are homeless on any given night in Baltimore.

Cleary was undaunted last December, after panhandlers were blamed for the murder of Jacquelyn Smith, a crime since charged to her husband and stepdaughter.

Outside St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Cleary gave a pair of socks to Lauro. The Mexico native immediately put them on.

“Muchas gracias,” Lauro said. “Thank you very much.”

Plain white crew socks were chosen intentionally, as they allow medical providers to see if a patient has any bleeding due to sores or other injuries.

The future of Threaded Cross, Cleary said, will be facilitating sock drives for other organizations. Our Lady of the Fields, for instance, has used the ministry as the confirmation class’ service project.

An online sock drive requires no costs or minimums. Cleary, the intermediary, gets a good price for the socks, which are handed off to the organization or distributed by Threaded Cross.

Every fourth Friday, Cleary distributes socks at St. Vincent de Paul, usually around 300 pairs. He often does the same at the Franciscan Center.

Cleary aims to distribute 3,000 pairs of socks each month in Baltimore, then expand the ministry to Washington, D.C.

“Our demand exceeds our supply,” Cleary said. “I just feel like I’m doing God’s

work.”