

Gibbons alum provides rides, better opportunities with Vehicles for Change

A Buick Le Sabre may not be everyone's dream car, but for Janice Birkhead, it is a lifeline.

After an abusive situation at home forced her and her 8-year-old son to move into a friend's basement, she sought full-time employment. Yet without a car, she was unable to get to work by 5:30 a.m. using public transportation.

Enter Vehicles for Change (VFC), a nonprofit organization run by Martin Schwartz, president, who is an alumnus of St. Mark School, Catonsville, and The Cardinal Gibbons School, Baltimore.

VFC makes it possible for low-income families to own cars, which helps them achieve financial and personal independence. Statistical studies show more than 70 percent of families obtain better-paying jobs after obtaining a car.

"I am able now to see a light at the end of the tunnel," said Ms. Birkhead, who was in a financial bind while switching from part-time to full-time employment. "Having this car will enable me to keep a job that I love for what I hope will be many years to come."

Mr. Schwartz, 52, who uses many personal contacts and is "out there shaking hands and kissing babies" to solicit car donations, feels his career isn't work, but residue of his Catholic upbringing and education. He prefers to treat everyone as he would like to be treated, living his life with character in mind, giving back and doing the right thing.

"What I came away with from Gibbons was constant reinforcement that it's OK to be your own person, to forge new paths."

Besides VFC, his other initiatives have included organizing National Collegiate

Athletic Association men's basketball and lacrosse tournaments in Baltimore. Whatever the venture, the entrepreneur tries to instill goodness in his clients as well.

"We ask them to help someone once a month who doesn't have a car," said Mr. Schwartz, promoting the philosophy, "You've been given, now you have to give back."

Ninety-five percent of clients are single mothers.

"The most amazing thing to me is I get paid to do this," he said about awarding 40-60 cars monthly and seeing "the impact it has on these folks."

He remembers one client who had a two-and-a-half-hour morning commute on public transportation from her home, to day care drop-off and then to work. Depending on the bus schedule was too challenging, and although she was a good employee, her company couldn't depend on her to arrive on time.

The woman purchased a VFC car and reduced her commute to 45 minutes.

VFC charges \$600-\$700 per vehicle, finances the cars and offers tags and title services without clients ever having to visit the Motor Vehicle Administration or a bank.

Because the challenge to find car donors is increasing, VFC has found an alternate way to promote the program - by forging partnerships with nonprofit organizations and schools like Calvert Hall College High School, Towson, which receives \$150 per each car donated.

Mr. Schwartz said that 73 percent of recipients have obtained better jobs or promotions, and have increased their income by an average of \$4,800.

"Recipients feel better about themselves, the independence they have gained and what they can do for their children. Once people find out about us, they love the fact that their donated car is going to a family."

Cars do make a difference!

How Vehicles for Change (VFC) works:

- public donates 100 percent of cars
- VFC repairs
- Recipients meet criteria (low-income, employed, insurable, clean driving record, no criminal background, drug-free)
- VFC sells vehicle for \$600-\$700, provides warranty and loan
- Recipients gain independence and find better jobs
- Children have more opportunity for after-school activities
- Everyone feels better!

To donate a vehicle to VFC, call 410-242-9674 or visit www.vehiclesforchange.org