

Angels in our midst

Florence Brittain and her husband, William, know that success comes one can tab at a time. And it's all done for the children.

"Every little bit helps," she says, noting that people from all over have contributed to their success, with can tabs sent to them from across the country and Canada. All proceeds from recycling the tabs are used to buy whatever is needed for children at the 22 Shriners hospitals, and locally for the ones in Springfield and Boston.

"I get them in the mail from Arizona, from Florida, from Texas. I get them from upstate New York," says Florence. "I couldn't really tell you how many people send them."

The retired West Springfield great-grandparents (William is retired from General Electric; Florence is retired from U.S. Envelope) have been collecting can tabs for some 18 years, and Florence became chairperson of the Can Tab Program in 1993.

A member of the Helma Court #64 Ladies Oriental Shrine of North America for many years, Florence takes collections very seriously. And it has added up, especially with the current price of aluminum at 60 cents a pound.

From January to the end of September 2006, the Brittain's and another couple involved in the program have collected more than 11,000 pounds of can tabs, valued at more than \$6,700. Since the program's inception in November 1989, more than 540,000 pounds of tabs were collected as of last year.

"At first people thought it [collecting can tabs] was wrong and they didn't believe it," says Florence. "We had to prove to them that this is not a hoax, that this is for real."

Up to twice a week, the Brittain's visit the Shriners Hospital in Springfield using a truck to carry some 14 barrels each containing up to 100 pounds of tabs to Kane Scrap Iron & Metal Co. Inc. in Chicopee, Mass. Florence says Kane is a family business that has been offering the highest possible rate for the aluminum tabs since the program started.

"What he gives us is what he gets," Florence said. "Out of all the charities that he [gives to], this is the most rewarding ... We collected 1,300 pounds just this week."

For the Brittain's, being involved with the Shriners is a large part of their lives. "He's a Shriner. I'm a Shriner. We're Masons, we're Shriners, we're Eastern Star." We work together for the children. Our main topic is children," says Florence, a past high priestess of the shrine. Together she and William had six daughters.

Indeed, Florence has donated over 5,000 hours of her time, and her husband, more than 7,000 hours, to the Shriners Hospital in Springfield. He services the hospital's vans, while she works at the information desk, directing people where they need to go.

The Shriners Hospitals provide services free of charge to children in need. In fact, a couple of the Brittain's grandchildren were patients at the Shriners Hospital before the couple ever got involved in the program.

Many of the 130 members of the Ladies Shrine collect can tabs, and many people in the community do, as well. Up to a dozen schools are collecting can tabs, and Florence has traveled to schools to speak to the children about the program. She says the schoolchildren collect them in big boxes and many come to see them being collected after the school year is over.

The Quabbin School in Ware collected 1,129 lbs in one year, and the Chapin School (K-6) in Springfield has been saving them for about two years. The Britains were about to go pick up their tabs – some 2 million of them. From May through June 2006, the Britains collected 500-700 lbs at area schools.

But schools are not the only ones collecting. At a Good Sam RV Club rally in Greenfield, Mass., on Memorial Day weekend, the Britains had to hire a truck to collect their largest haul yet – 3,710 lbs of can tabs, plus crushed cans, that club members had collected all year.

The money raised has gone to purchase medical and non-medical items. Whatever is needed for the children. In March 2006, the program was able to purchase a skin mesher to help skin heal for the Shriners Burn Hospital in Boston.

Asked whether she is perceived as an angel to the kids, Florence readily said she believes in angels: “I’m angel crazy,” she said. “I have them all over. I have beautiful, beautiful angels all over my house ... I wear them around my neck all the time.”

Florence writes down all the collections – she doesn’t use a computer – but the work is worth it, she says. And she urged people who donate to include their name and address because she personally writes to thank them.

“We’ve worked hard 18 years now. It’s worth it all, the labors, the hours. You never get for the hours what you put in. That is your job.”

“It’s all about the children,” she said. “We love children. It’s worth everything.”

By Stephen Ide