


Volunteers steer Homeless Coach near completion

Wednesday, September 29, 2010 | James Rincon |  1

By James Rincon

Pflag Reporter

A team of volunteers from a local camper dealership used their time and their tools earlier this month to help the area's homeless get off the street.

The crew at Pflugerville's Princess Craft Campers and Trailers spent the weekend of Sept. 11 outfitting a repurposed RV with furniture and technology that will allow for live-streaming video over the Internet.

When complete, the "X-Stream" makeover will transform the vehicle into The Homeless Coach, a program from the mind of area resident Tom Baum, that will help homeless people off the street by building a community for them through social networking.

"The renovation is really reconfiguring the RV to enable streaming media to occur inside the RV as well as outside. The purpose for the streaming media is social networking with the Internet, and then there is going to be another component of social networking, which is face to face, sitting across the table or sharing a meal, that type of thing. So in order to do that most effectively, we pretty much had to gut the interior and reconfigure it to have a bunch of benches with tables and sort of space to eat on and that type of thing, plus adding all the streaming media equipment," Baum said.

In August, Baum's team of volunteers and the staff at Princess Craft gutted the RV to prepare it for this month's renovation. After all donations to the project come in, the vehicle will be equipped with two wide-screen TV monitors, four laptops, each driving its own camera inside the RV, as well as two additional cameras outside the RV that will give exterior views.

The experts at Princess Craft said custom jobs like Baum's are their specialty.

“Everybody that works here has volunteered their time to help, so they’re out there doing the technical stuff,” Princess Craft owner P.J. Buerger said. “We’ve done all kinds of things. They’re all different. The last one we did was a ’95 Pace Arrow that we put flat-screen TVs and fireplaces and pretty much gutted it ... changed the walls – it was fabulous. Everybody wants something different.”

The RV’s living space has been redesigned into two mobile dining rooms where sponsors can share meals with the program’s enrollees and stream their conversation live on web cameras.

The program is intended to allow sponsors to get to know the story behind the area’s homeless over the Internet and build a social networking community that will support the enrollees as they work to improve their situations.

Baum said the community has already shown outpourings of generosity.

“We had some really huge stuff come in from Living Direct, which is a company that really markets their stuff on the web, and they’re a warehousing company. They’re the ones that donated the compact kitchen that is a refrigerator, two-burner stove and a little pantry,” Baum said. “The day before we started... we got a call from Lowe’s. They came through in a huge way and really filled all the gaps we had as far as being able to do this thing. So it’s really cool, and that’s the way this project basically is run; have faith, communicate what is needed and what we’re doing, and it will happen.”

Buerger said more than 100 volunteer hours have already gone into renovating The Homeless Coach, and she, her husband Richard and their crew plan to see the project through to completion.

“There are a few reasons why we decided to own a company, none of them have to do with making a lot of money... Our goal is to try to make sure that the people that work here have as good of a lifestyle as we can provide,” she said. “The other part is so that we can participate in projects like this.

“It will all come around. When we have it, and we can, we always donate. This one has been particularly nice because everyone who works here has also donated. They donate days, and for guys who work as hard as these guys work in the hot sun, to come out and do this another day for free, it’s big.”

The Homeless Coach is a fund of the Austin Community Foundation. Baum hopes positive results will help the two-year pilot program become a nonprofit organization. Volunteers can contact The Homeless Coach via e-mail at info.homelesscoach.org or visit homelesscoach.org for more information.

Editor’s note: This article is part of the Pflag’s ongoing coverage of the building of The Homeless Coach. For previous coverage, [CLICK HERE](#).