

Wonders and A Challenge: A Fresh Start Report

Fresh Start Pallet Products, LLC was conceived in the backyard of Grace Lutheran Church here in Asylum Hill. It was meant to be a training and employment initiative after listening to stories of hungry people with little hope, and too many lost dreams. “Let’s build furniture out of used shipping pallets, and, in that way, invite people to a new start, a second chance.” This is an update on what’s happened in the last and few months.

First, under the continued leadership of master carpenter, Lee Whittemore, we know that we can, and do, build really great furniture. More than \$ 11,000 of furniture made from pallets has been designed, built or commissioned since June of 2015. In five months, Fresh Start Pallet Products has produced more than thirty pieces of indoor and outdoor furniture; some custom, and some standard. All built with loving attention by a team of people who are thrilled to have work and excited to be creating products of real value to individuals and their communities.



By networking with healthcare and social service partners, Fresh Start supports people in their life transformation from poverty, joblessness and dependency to a new sense of purpose and meaning. One of our furniture makers is on his way to completing a rehabilitation program that was initiated through a healthcare provider, and delivered by a social services agency – all encouraged and supported by Fresh Start. The job was the enabler; the health-care and social services networking were essential. None of this is easy; none of this is about waving wands. This is about transformation that requires time, hard work, strong spiritual and social supports, and a new view of one’s (1) health, (2) place in society, and (3) self-confidence. It’s these things that over time bring about permanent life changes, and it is working.

Beginning with a conversation over lunch with four people, Fresh Start now has a Steering Committee 16 people strong. This team has rolled up its sleeves, raising in excess of \$ 23,000, establishing a corporate structure and filing with the Secretary of State. We garnered coverage on TV, radio and newsprint, capped with an unsolicited “thumbs-up” by the Editorial Board of the Hartford Courant. With the help of people engaged and interested in the arts, we expanded the concept of Fresh Start to include artists customizing furniture and now excitedly engaged in another source of income and creativity. Word of mouth customers are lining up for the furniture enhanced and customized by our talented artists.

A first sales brochure was created, along with the beginnings of a product catalogue and a pricing list and strategy. We have already taken steps to trademark the business, and to build a more comprehensive business plan reflecting our growing understanding of this emerging business.

These are the wonders - a business designed, built and implemented as a means to offer a new option for people who have no new paths to follow. It feels like there is something behind all of this happening; something good, maybe something holy.

The challenge is simple, yet all too real - finding a place in Asylum Hill where we can grow Fresh Start. This week we are moving our outdoor operations temporarily into Trinity Episcopal Church on Sigourney Street. The strength of support from the leaders, clergy and lay, of this community of faith, has been simply wonderful.

After searching for months we did find a location across the street from Grace that could make perfect sense. We are praying that the owner of this building, the State of Connecticut, will figure out a way to make this available to us. The building has been unoccupied for 13 years; it offers wonderful accessibility, and its proximity to partner agencies and the church is amazing. We are hoping to hear shortly if this will be made available to us.



So, we are growing more and more excited by this simple idea, and the widespread, enthusiasm, acceptance and appreciation it is generating. We are grateful to all who have supported, encouraged and advised us. After five months of hard work... the lights are all green!

- Pastor Rick Kremer