

## Project to help low-income families furnish homes

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When Downtown Eastside resident Annette Anthony wanted temporary care of her four-year-old niece and 14-year-old nephew, she was told without her own place to live she couldn't have custody of both.

"I know their mother isn't ready to take care of them yet, just like my mother-in-law took my kids when I wasn't ready," said Anthony. "But now with the help of the First United Church, I got the keys to my new place and Kenny came to stay last night."

Anthony, who gained custody of her niece in January, had been living with her sister. She wanted also custody of her nephew, but was told by social service agencies she needed her own home. But despite landing her own place, Anthony has no furniture, and the family spent this week sleeping on the floor and used an upturned cardboard box as a kitchen table.

That will change Friday when they receive enough furniture for their two-bedroom apartment on Jackson Street, thanks to a project between the HomeStart Foundation and 1-800-Rid-Of-It. This weekend, the non-profit agency and junk removal company join forces for the first annual Housewarming Drive to furnish between three to five homes for families in need.

The HomeStart Foundation, launched in 2003, helps people with little money, many of whom were formerly homeless, furnish new housing. HomeStart picks up donated furniture and stores it in its warehouse on Rand Road south of Southwest Marine Drive, and delivers it to approved applicants. The foundation works with more than 80 social service agencies and non-profits.

Executive director Vikki Stevenson said clients give the group a "wish list" that typically includes beds, dressers, a kitchen table and chairs, couch and side tables. "We work with women with children who've fled domestic violence, people who were previously homeless or refugees. People who would have no other way to receive furniture," Stevenson said. "They often have children and it's really hard on them to make friends when they can't invite anyone over because they're eating breakfast on



CREDIT: photo - Dan Toulgoet  
HomeStart executive director Vikki Stevenson takes stock of furniture donated to equip needy families with the basics in starting a home.

the floor."

Mike McKee, president of 1-800-Rid-Of-It, said his company started working with HomeStart last August. "In our business we pick up a lot of gently used furniture and we had been dropping it off at places like the Salvation Army," McKee said. "The problem is a lot of those places are already overwhelmed with donations. When we found out about HomeStart, we knew it was a perfect fit."

Since last September, McKee has donated a truck and staff one day a month to pick up donations for HomeStart. He's dedicated the remainder of this week to picking up used furniture to be used in the Housewarming Drive.

Anthony looks forward to giving her niece and nephew a fresh start. "This morning they ate breakfast out of two bowls with plastic spoons, and I bought groceries to make Kenny lunch before he went to school," Anthony said. "But on Friday we're getting furniture and things will be like home again."

For information on donating items, with the exception of used mattresses, call 1-800-743-6348.

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