A Helping Hand
By Don Procter

A small charitable act of kindness eight years ago has snowballed into one very large yearly effort to raise money for a good cause.

When Hugh Laird, executive director of the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario (ISCA), met with staff at the Good Shepherd Centre in 1996, his heartstrings were pulled by the charitable group’s efforts to help the homeless and disadvantaged. Equally impressed with the work at the center was Verne Zapfe, president of Four Seasons Drywall Systems & Acoustic Ltd., so the two decided to look at ways of raising money to help the cause.

Within five weeks they had organized a golf tournament that brought in a whopping $40,000 from entry fees and auction (all figures in Canadian dollars) for the downtown Toronto centre that houses homeless. Zapfe, who decided to sit on the GSC’s board of directors, spearheaded a St. Valentine’s dance, raising more than $60,000 from the gala event. Since then the fund-raising tournie and dance have become annual events, raising more than $300,000.

Laird says every year he’s amazed at how much money the two events bring in. Here’s a breakdown of how they have done it. A round of golf, which cost $200 in the first year is now up to $400. But there’s only room for about 280 golfers on the course north of Toronto, so Zapfe and those involved in organizing the tournament turned to other means of raising big cash. A raffle turned out to be the big winner. In the first year raffle tickets sold for $25 or 5 for $100. Today, organizers have no problem selling them for $1,000 each. “That’s when we started making $180,000 to $200,000 at the tournaments and a $100,000 and change at the annual galas,” notes Zapfe.

Having raised more than $2 million for the center over the past eight years is a stunning feat. “If you’d have told me eight years ago that I could have raised that kind of money, I’d have said ‘You gotta be kidding me’.”

Modest to a tee, the well-known drywall contractor dismisses the idea that he’s the big cheese behind the fund-raising events. “Yes, I kind of promote this thing, but without a lot of other people involved I’d be a dud. It’s a real construction-oriented thing.” Support comes from many members of ISCA, some general contractors, a variety of the building trades and union organizations. Others such as a pharmaceutical company also have made major contributions.

Just how supportive the building industry has been can be illustrated by the actions of one contractor. When Dan Daly of P.J. Daly Contracting Limited, won a $105,000 raffle prize, he wanted to “donate it back” to the Good Shepherd Centre. “I wouldn’t let him because nobody would buy tickets if they were expected to donate the money back. I told him, ‘If you want to help just continue to buy tickets every year and he’s done that’,” explains Zapfe.

Located in downtown Toronto, the Good Shepherd Centre’s mandate is to provide shelter to 86 homeless men. The center provides 750 meals daily, clothing, medical services, daily drop-in and various referral services such as employment. For every dollar raised only eight cents is spent on administrative costs while the remaining 92 cents is used for direct programming for the homeless. The money raised by Zapfe and company has gone into new equipment, staff wages, medicine, counseling for alcohol and drug addiction and various other operating expenses.

Adrienne Urquhart, director of fund raising and public relations at GSC, says Zapfe and Laird have been an “incredible” assistance to the center. Typically, money from municipal and provincial governments for agencies like the GSC is only for specific items, not general operating expenses. That means the money that Zapfe and others have raised is especially important. “They have been instrumental in raising money for so many things we need.”

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.