



Everything Jersey

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A good home for good deeds

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From the day he showed up at a convent with a few leftover fish beneath his arm to the days when he rummaged through grocery store Dumpsters in search of produce and baked goods, Barney Welch believed.

He believed he could help feed the poor. He believed his charity would prosper even when he was no longer able to work at it 18 hours a day. He believed it would find a permanent home even as it bounced between temporary ones.

"I've always believed in divine providence," Welch said. "And I've never been disappointed."

The charity Welch started a quarter-century ago with no assets except a battered pickup truck and a corner of the Middletown barn beneath the apartment where he lived now has a place to call its own -- a 50-by-70-foot steel building at the back of a school bus and taxi cab lot in Middletown.

Known as the "Barn for the Poorest of the Poor," the group had a Mass to celebrate the opening of its new building this week. Many of the more than 100 regular volunteers attended. Nuns and priests from the religious orders whose soup kitchens and pantries benefit from the food the Barn collects were there, too. So was Welch.

The building -- which has shelves for storing donated food and an overhead door so trucks making pickups or deliveries can pull in out of the weather -- is a gift from John Murphy, the owner of Murphy Bus Service and Murphy Transportation.

"I remember hearing a long time ago about how every evening Barney was going out in his beat-up old pickup truck and collecting food," Murphy said. "I lost track of him and then years later -- years and years later -- I heard he was still doing it. I was amazed."

In the early 1980s, Welch was supplementing the income he earned as a caretaker at several Middletown horse farms by selling fish. He would buy them on the bay shore in Monmouth County and sell them to wholesalers in New York.

One evening, when he had a few fish left over, he dropped by a convent in the South Bronx run by the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Theresa. The nun who answered the door told Welch they had run out of food to feed the poor and had spent the day praying for more.

Welch said he took that as a powerful sign that it was God's will that he should help feed the poor.

His operation could not have been less formal than it was in the early years. Welch would ride around in his pickup truck looking for places where he might find discarded food -- day-old bread, bruised fruit and vegetables, packaged goods that were just past their sell-by dates. Then he would drop it off at soup kitchens and food pantries run by the Missionaries of Charity, the Dominican Nuns, the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, Catholic Worker and other religious groups.