A Helping Hand for WUMCO

By Ralph Hitchens

When our neighbors here in the Upcounty are in need, one organization has always stepped up to the plate: WUMCO Help, Inc. Starting with a small food pantry forty-two years ago, Jane Stearns and her late husband Fred built WUMCO into a multi-service charity, run by Jane out of their home north of Beallsville. If you’ve been there, you know that Jane’s house is old, long in need of repair and grounds maintenance.

Enter the Poolesville “Helping Hands” coalition—originally formed as an umbrella organization to coordinate participation in Christmas in April (now Rebuilding Together). Helping Hands had lately shrunk to a few people, including longtime community activist Ray Hoewing, plus a much-depleted bank account. Ray wanted to resurrect an ecumenical service organization involving Memorial United Methodist Church, and thinking along similar lines was Catherine Beliveau from the Poolesville Presbyterian Church. In May of this year, Helping Hands was reborn. Since WUMCO was already doing so much for the needy, everyone agreed that Jane Stearns’s home/office/warehouse would be the first major project.

There was plenty to be done: the forest was closing in on her house, which itself was in need of painting, electrical and plumbing repair, and a new kitchen floor. Some work was done in advance of the scheduled workday. Thanks go out to Joe Ryba of Ryba Roofing for installing forty feet of gutter and downspouts, also to Bernie Mihm of Fine Earth Landscaping for regrading the driveway and building a retaining wall around the patio—both of these well-known Poolesville contractors cheerfully donated their labor and materials. Two other short workdays involving about a half dozen volunteers had already removed approximately twenty trees and one thousand square feet of underbrush from around WUMCO headquarters; it really was a jungle out there when Helping Hands got started. On Saturday, October 9, the major effort got underway with thirty-six volunteers, both skilled and unskilled, working through the morning and well into the afternoon. More encroaching trees and bushes were removed to restore what had been flourishing side and back yards, two ventilator doors were repaired, staining applied to the exterior wooden walls, new subflooring installed in the kitchen, and some electrical repairs and upgrades were accomplished that will give WUMCO headquarters a new lease on life. Perhaps the crowning touch was the creation of a ten-by-twenty-foot flower garden, with plants and bulbs donated by the Methodist Church. The materials outlay for this project (apart from that donated by Joe and Bernie) probably came to about $1,000.

The Helping Hands committee now looks ahead to see what the future holds, if other deserving projects surface and some seed money can be found to continue the good work begun this year.