

Leap of Faith



Froggy's Invests in Area Children

Story and Photos by Preston Knight

On her best days, Tina Marie Scully comes home in tears. A perfect world would be set up where she would not volunteer at Froggy's Closet because all children's needs would be met at home, making the store unnecessary. In the absence of that is the presence of Froggy's, an offshoot program of the nonprofit Families Reaching Out Group, or F.R.O.G., that Scully co-founded.

She directs a team of eight volunteers for the store at 32 E. Piccadilly St., sending home donated clothes, toys, baby necessities, and much more for free to Winchester-area foster families and at-risk children referred from partner agencies. In 2016, Froggy's Closet handed out 18,000 clothing items and had 900 referrals.

Emotions can run high for Scully, who has seen children having to share shoes and encountered homeless boys relegated to wearing men's pants. These occasions can be painfully sad moments to witness, yet they help reinforce to her the significance of Froggy's in the community.

"It really empowers children," she said. "It gives them self-esteem that they are wearing clothing they can be proud of, and that fits."

'Invaluable Resource'

Founded in 2009 as a support group for foster parents, F.R.O.G. obtained nonprofit

status in 2011, branching out to serve any child in need. Its mission is to make a difference in the lives of children who have been victims of abuse, neglect or are otherwise at-risk, letting them know people do care about them.

Support meetings for foster families are held the first Monday of each month at Froggy's, where \$150 is given to a child to use toward extracurricular activities. The group also provides vouchers for haircuts and book bags for school.

Froggy's is the predominant program provided by F.R.O.G. that opened at its current location in December 2015. It's volunteer run, so nobody, including Scully, takes in a salary. Everything in the store is donated.

The building has a frog motif and includes a dressing room and play area. Children are given at least seven matching outfits when referred to the store, Scully said.

One volunteer cuts sleeves off men's T-shirts and creates a tote bag to carry clothes, handing it out to parents. This is viewed as a much more comforting option than simply stuffing clothes into a trash bag.

Scully will often help with referrals the day they come in, and, through a statewide foster organization, NewFound Families, she assists people around Virginia.

"I have taken clothing to Richmond before," Scully said. "I'm always on call."

The focus for Froggy's remains serving children in the Winchester area. Unfortunately, that keeps volunteers plenty busy.



In the last five or six years, an increase in drug use has left the area in bigger need of placing children in foster care, said Judy Blau, a resource family coordinator for the Virginia Department of Social Services.

"Frequently, we have a need for families that can take sibling groups because our preference is for them to remain together," she said. "There is also a need for families willing to take teens. The goal is for children to be returned to their families but in the meantime, they need a family that can support and nurture them and in many cases help them deal with the trauma they have experienced."

Denise Britt, who is also a DSS resource family coordinator in Winchester, adds that there is a growing need for families who have a stay-at-home parent as well.

"Specifically, there is an increasing number of babies coming into care who cannot go into day care immediately because they are newborns, may be substance exposed, may have a disability, or are recovering from abuse," she said.

Froggy's, Blau said, provides an "invaluable resource" to foster families given how often children come into care with no belongings of any kind.

"Tina Marie has set up a system where professionals can submit a checklist of items needed for the children," she said. "On a regular basis, our office has requested clothing, diapers and toys (for Christmas) and received these items. It helps the foster children and also relieves the foster parents of the financial burden of providing everything. Some of our families have received beds or dressers, which is also a big help."

Lilly Pad Project

F.R.O.G. relies on fundraising and donations to support area children, and it also holds a major fundraiser each fall. The fifth annual Abnormal Formal is scheduled for Sept. 9 at Piccadilly Public House and Restaurant. The event features a theme and entertainment, and encourages attendees to dress in a fun way. This year's theme is "Under the Tuscan Moon."

Volunteers are currently raising money and seeking donated goods and services for a special project, titled Lilly Pad. The plan is to renovate the rundown second floor of Froggy's into a "safe place" for foster children to have parties and their families to meet, Scully said.

Among other uses for the space, it would serve as a neutral location for foster parents and biological parents to have visits with children. As of early March, cabinets, flooring and paint were among the items already donated. The goal is to receive donations to have the Lilly Pad available by June.

"That might be unrealistic," Scully said in early March.

The optimism, however, is unsurprising. Scully has been the foster mother to 50 children over the last 19 years, and she considers becoming a foster parent a "calling." At a young age, Scully said, her grandfather would call her "grandma" because of the way she held and cared for babies.

She has four children of her own,

including one who is adopted.

"You have a hole in your heart every time [a foster child leaves], but you have your own children and you pray that you are making a positive difference in this child's life," Scully said. "You give them as much as you would your biological children."

Sherry Rawls-Bryce, chairwoman of F.R.O.G.'s board of directors, said she has always been impressed by the amount of work the group's volunteers put in and the energy and passion that Scully displays for children.

"I was curious to learn more and desired to become a part of something so meaningful," Rawls-Bryce said. "Since the day I stepped foot into Froggy's Closet I have been a volunteer and supporter of F.R.O.G. Tina Marie is an inspirational leader and highly respected for all she does for children."

Scully helped form F.R.O.G. to make it easier on foster parents to exchange ideas and belongings. With Froggy's Closet, children are easily the real beneficiaries.

"It's heartwarming," Scully said. "They have a smile on their face when they leave Froggy's Closet."

For more information, visit www.frog-kids.org or call (540) 773-4192.

Families Reaching Out Group, or F.R.O.G., is a nonprofit that supports Winchester-area foster families and at-risk children referred from partner agencies. Its store, at 32 E. Piccadilly St., handed out 18,000 clothing items and had 900 referrals in 2016.

