



The Times

Nonprofits feel the strain:

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BY RUTHELLEN S. RUBIN

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all Street vs. Main Street? One thing is for sure: no more Easy Street. The headlines are so frightening that we are becoming numb to the repercussions of a stock market free-fall and the end of our financial system as we know it. Who knows what the coming months will bring?

What scares me most is the impact on those charitable organizations that tackle the challenges no one else can, or will: the starving, the homeless, the disabled, the aged, the infirm, the addicted, the unemployed, the uneducated and anyone unable to help him/herself. Our nonprofit organizations are being hit with the "perfect storm" (and I don't mean "perfect" in the positive sense). Some of their most reliable funders, such as Wachovia and Merrill Lynch, are gone; government funding is shrinking at an alarming rate; foundations' endowments are plummeting, leaving less to give; costs of food and fuel have never been higher, and needy clients are lined up at the door in unprecedented numbers.

Connie Mercer, executive director of HomeFront, has never seen this level of demand: "We had a record 104 people lined up at our door for a free bag of groceries in one five-hour period last week. I estimate roughly a 20 percent increase in demand for food this month. The new faces we are seeing include well-dressed, educated individuals and lots of elderly."

At the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, executive director Dennis Micai told me that demand is already up by more than 7 percent and donations are not keeping pace of that need. "I was really startled last week," says Micai, "when an elderly couple who used to volunteer for us came in for a meal."

Connie Mercer told a similar story: "A lovely lady was waiting at the door when we opened up last Wednesday. She looked so familiar and told me it was probably because she "adopted" two homeless children last Christmas, buying gifts and clothing for them for the holiday. She never dreamt she would be coming to us for help. She was unable to pay her rent and about to lose the roof over her head."

Holiday Appeal season, with its plethora of solicitations, will be upon us in the coming weeks. There will be pleas and truly compelling stories asking us to support food pantries, hospitals, zoos, libraries, clinics, counseling centers, environmental causes, day-care centers, schools, synagogues and churches. Once again, we will be asked to donate, advocate, celebrate, run, walk, solicit, foster, promote and sponsor on behalf of the causes most dear to us.

So, how is it going to play out this year?

When all else fails, we turn to our family, friends and neighbors for help. Our local human services, health, educational and cultural organizations need us now more than ever. We are their family, friends and neighbors. Of course, it will be more difficult for everyone, as we are all struggling to pay the bills. However, this is the year we must be creative and consider where our holiday dollars can have the greatest impact. It is the year to give a donation in the name of our family members or friends rather than giving a fruit basket. I cannot think of a better year than this one to have a party and ask our guests to make a donation to our favorite charity rather than bringing us a bottle of wine or a red pillar candle. It is the year to show our children that there is always an avenue to be charitable, no matter how small the amount.

Undoubtedly, this year, money will be scarce and you will have less to give. However, I believe this community is capable of rising to the challenge in support of our nonprofit sector. It will be up to us, the citizens of Mercer County, to keep our nonprofit organizations strong and vigilant. They are the last resort for so many of our neighbors, and could, someday, be the last resort for us.

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