

Volunteer of the Month Lee Whittlemore

Lee has never really been a stranger to volunteering. Since his final return to Hartford and Asylum Hill where he was born, he has served on various committees including the Farmington Avenue Alliance and the Farmington Asylum Business District as well as the West End Civic Association when he lived on Kenyon St. And even aside from these committees, Lee has always been generous with his time whether it was when he ran the Nutshell Press and published the annual West End - Asylum Hill Directory or when he had his own construction business. But it wasn't until he connected with Louisa Barton-Duguay one summer day when she was looking to get some inexpensive benches made for the garden that she was planting at Grace Lutheran church, that this current volunteer opportunity presented itself. To be sure, no one involved in it, envisioned what it has become, perhaps least of all Lee, but when he agreed to build a few benches for the garden, he set himself on a course that now involves about 40 hours per week of running a woodworking shop called Fresh Start that makes both outdoor and indoor furniture out of recycled wood pallets while training currently three workers in need of employment in all the basic skills needed to go on to a productive life in society. Each of the employees receives a minimum wage salary during the work/training period. Lee works and supervises without a salary. "I don't have a lot of money, but God provides everything I need" Lee says as he reflects on his current situation. He has a modest retirement income and can walk to almost everywhere he needs to go. He also finds the rewards both, of creating quality products with his hands and helping out those less fortunate with his heart to be a very satisfying use of his time. He is especially pleased to be able to work with Waseem, a recent refugee from Syria who experienced torture before coming to America. Lee is still very philosophical when considering the successes of the program. Several of those hired have visibly improved their lives, while others only lasted a short while and returned to their previous life. Lee finds happiness just knowing he's trying to help his fellow man. For more photos of Lee and the Fresh Start Pallet Products go to <https://goo.gl/photos/qwMNT52gUbeuyFkg8>

