

Sew what??

by IRSG and Pelham UCC member Ron Schneider

Years ago, a number of people from the First Congregational Church of Pelham started volunteering at the Wish Project in Lowell. The Wish Project operates a used furniture and clothing bank. Donations are sorted and generally distributed to people in need in the area. For years we sorted the furniture and clothing without giving much thought to where the things ultimately ended up. One night while at a reception to celebrate the founder of the Wish Project, I was making small talk and happened to ask the person sitting next to me "Where does this stuff go?" The woman just grinned and said "follow me and I will show you." Over the next several months, she introduced me to many immigrant and refugee families throughout the area, and I came to recognize much of the furniture and some of the clothing that I had previously sorted. It was an eye-opening experience. She introduced me to the International Institute of New England (IINE), which is an organization that helps refugee families resettle when they arrive in the United States.

Shortly thereafter, I was asked if I knew how to repair sewing machines. Without giving it too much thought, I replied, "Sure." Repairing sewing machines didn't appear to be particularly difficult, so I proceeded to fix their machines. The next request was "Could you also teach a sewing class?" Once again without too much hesitation – "Sure." The IINE was starting a sewing program, primarily for men, so that they could learn a skill which would result in a job in a local mill in Haverhill. The task was challenging but fun. Four immigrant men who had never sewn – and me. They proceeded to break the machines faster than I could repair them. Several weeks into the classes, I noticed one of the men sewing some used curtain material together. When I asked what he was working on, he looked at me sheepishly and said "Underwear for my family. They don't give us underwear when we get our clothes at the used clothing outlet." I think I was more embarrassed than he was. After all the years of sorting used clothing, I never noticed that there were no underwear or socks. I immediately got together with some folks at our church and lo and behold "**Undie Sunday**" was born. We explained to our congregation the plight of people who depend on donated clothing and the lack of underwear and socks. Within a few weeks we had hundreds of packages of new socks and underwear. We distributed these to clothing banks and veterans' organizations in the area.

Ten years later we are still collecting underwear and socks every January.

Sewing machines continue to be a part of my ministry. A few years ago, during a mission moment by the folks from Lazarus House in Lawrence, I was told that they were desperately seeking someone who could fix their sewing machines. Once again – "Sure!" Once again, a short time later came the next request – "Could you assist with teaching a sewing class?"

Once people hear that you fix donated sewing machines, they appear out of nowhere. I continue to receive donations of used sewing machines and repair them and seek to give them to people in need. And who knows, perhaps teach them to sew.

*NHCUCC Immigrant & Refugee Support Group volunteer **Ron Schneider** is a member of the First Congregational Church of Pelham, UCC. As an active congregation in a town on the*

Massachusetts border, the Pelham UCC's mission and ministry include outreach and support of those in need in the nearby Merrimack Valley communities of Lowell, Lawrence and vicinity. To reach Ron to learn more about the ministry he describes or perhaps to secure a repaired sewing machine for an asylum-seeker or an immigrant or refugee family, contact Ron at ron7249@gmail.com