

Jobless support group catches on nationwide

When he created Neighbors Helping Neighbors early in 2011, John Fugazzie wasn't hoping it would become a longstanding organization.

The River Edge resident had lost his business during the recession and, along with a few friends, he created the group to help other out-of-work local residents support each other and network their way to new jobs. They began meeting at the River Edge library. His fondest hope was that he and the others would become employed, making the group irrelevant.

So Friday's gathering at the Hilton Hotel in Hasbrouck Heights to celebrate the non-profit's second anniversary and its tremendous growth had a touch of the bittersweet to it.

Still, Fugazzie is proud of what Neighbors Helping Neighbors has accomplished.

It now has 1,100 members in 25 groups meeting at libraries in eight New Jersey counties, and another group just started up in Boston.

"When they called me to talk about starting a group in Boston, I told them I hate the Red Sox,"

Fugazzie laughed. "I'm a dedicated Yankees fan, so I told them as long as we didn't talk about the Red Sox we'd be all right."

He's also heard from people in Toronto, Nashville and Tulsa who are interested in starting groups there. Much of the national interest is thanks to the work of Abby Kohut, a job recruiter and career coach who's on a national tour promoting her book on helping people find work. Kohut has spoken at Neighbors Helping Neighbors meetings and promotes the organization at her speaking engagements.

The organization has attracted

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support from federal and state government officials as well as community groups like the Rotary.

Friday's speakers included Ben Seigel, deputy director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Labor; state Sen. Robert Gordon, D-Fair Lawn, Bergen County's United Way President Tom Toronto and several career-counseling professionals.

Fugazzie gets his biggest kick from what he calls the organization's success stories: 233 people who have found jobs after becoming members.

In fact, Fugazzie was success story No. 3 when he was hired for a middle management job at A&P in May 2011. Unfortunately, 17 months later he was out of work again, the victim of a round of corporate layoffs. That was in October; he's been looking for a job ever since.

"I'm struggling big time," he said. But he won't take a penny of the money donated to Neighbors Helping Neighbors for himself — not that the organization raises a lot. Most of the donations go to fund activities like Friday's anniversary gathering.

"I don't want to make money off the group," Fugazzie insisted. "One idea I'm kicking around is a book on what I've learned doing this."

One of the key principles of Neighbors Helping Neighbors is that members follow the "Pay It Forward" model: If someone reaches a position where they can help another member — or just learns of some information that might benefit someone else — they reach out to help.

In that spirit, at the end of Kohut's presentation Friday she announced she would donate a portion of the proceeds from any sales of her book at the meeting to helping buy Fugazzie a cell phone to help with his job search.

"After I finished my speech, someone ran after me and told me that they would buy all of the books so that none of the job seekers would have to pay for them," Kohut said.

And Fugazzie could get that much-needed cell phone.

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