

The Bargain Box of Wilmington is operated under the aegis of **Church of the Servant, Episcopal**, Wilmington, N.C., as a multi-faceted outreach ministry to the poor, the homeless, and marginalized individuals. The Bargain Box is a thrift store which sells donated clothing and household items; provides free clothing and household goods from a free bin, through a voucher program, and to specific populations in need such as migrant workers; offers job training to persons in transition; and donates profits to established charities and social service organizations through a grant process.

History and Mission

As part of its community outreach to the poor and the homeless, Church of the Servant began operating The Bargain Box as a thrift store in 2000. The project began with grants of \$3,000 from the Diocese of East Carolina, \$2,000 from Christ Church, Cody Wyoming, and \$22,000 from the Cape Fear Memorial Foundation of Wilmington, as well as \$11,375 in gifts from individuals and donations of \$1,615 from local Episcopal organizations. A large well-located house was leased and renovated for efficient processing and display of resale clothing and household items and space for storing out of season items. The store has been successful in fulfilling its charitable mission of serving the community by providing jobs and training to hard-to-employ area residents transitioning from prison, homelessness, and abuse recovery; by promoting responsible recycling of used goods in a clean, attractive retail environment that respects the buyers as well as the donors. In addition to offering high quality merchandise at appropriate prices, free clothing and household items are distributed through a free bin and through various non-profit agencies. Another important part of the mission is to return our profits to the community through grants to existing ministries and non-profit organizations.

The Need

The Bargain Box addresses needs of the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and families in crisis. We clothe the poor by providing free or low cost clothes and household goods at the store, through our “free bin” or voucher program (Bargain Bucks) and by distributing free clothing through groups that house and feed the poor. Bargain Box gives large quantities of clothing and other goods to specific established ministries such as Episcopal Farmworkers Ministries, Newton Grove, NC; St. Peter the Fisherman Early Bread Program for the homeless, Wil. N.C.; The Salvation Army, Wil. N.C., The Lundy Foundation in Tanzania, Africa; Home of Hope, a orphanage for girls in India, and Amor Por La Ninez, a school for handicapped children in Cancun, Mexico. Since its inception, our policy has been that half of our annual profit distribution is given to Good Shepherd Center, a local organization serving the homeless. The other half is available for any non-profit to request grants.

Current Programs and Accomplishments

Employment and job training have been provided for 30 employees. We have been able to provide free clothing and household items through 100 different non-profit agencies and have given grants totaling over \$103,000 to charitable organizations.

From 2000 to 2003, Bargain Box used an informal voucher process to provide emergency free clothing and house wares to individuals and families in crisis. Any non-profit organization could request aid on their letterhead. No limits or guidelines were given making it difficult to implement once clients were in the store. In 2004 a new more structured process for this program was developed and named “**Bargain Bucks**.” The **Bargain Bucks** program is a way by which community agencies can provide a quality shopping experience for clients who might not have adequate monetary resources to meet their needs. Each participating agency will be provided with a set number of Bargain Bucks to be distributed at their discretion to their clients. Recipients can shop with their Bargain Bucks at the Bargain Box during regular store hours. Agencies are enrolled in the program at their request and allotted a specified amount based upon past experience. The agency is responsible for allotting a specific number of Bargain Bucks to a client who arrives at the Bargain Box knowing how much can be spent on items of their choice at no cost to them. Since 2005, nearly \$70,000 in Bargain Bucks were spent by clients through these agencies. It takes about \$10 to \$12 to clothe one adult in two complete outfits. It only takes about \$3.00 per outfit for children. The distribution runs 50/50 adult to child.

Populations Served

Training and employment at the Bargain Box is an ongoing focus of the ministry. From remodeling the facility in 2000 using carpentry trainees from My Brother’s Keeper to current employment of a mentally handicapped worker, a woman transitioning from a battered women’s shelter, community service court referrals and referrals from Good Shepherd Center, the Bargain Box emphasizes giving people a chance to learn and practice vital job-related skills. The store provides low-cost or free clothing and household goods (in a **respectful** manner) for those in need. Charitable, educational, or health-related groups may participate in our voucher program, “Bargain Bucks,” allowing the agency to provide free clothing or other merchandise from Bargain Box to persons in crisis. Half of our annual profit distribution is given to Good Shepherd Center, a local organization serving the homeless. The other half is available for any non-profit to request grants. An **Advisory Board** evaluates requests and recommendations are made to the **Vestry** (the governing board) of **Church of the Servant, Episcopal**. The population we serve is not limited by race, age, sex, sexual orientation, geographical location, or socio-economic status. Our mission is to serve any population with a need for the items donated or the money raised through sales.

Our motto is, “**If we share what we have, we will all have enough.**” To be good stewards of the gifts we receive from the community, we believe it is vital to get the best price possible at resale. Bargain Box contracts with a **full-time manager** who is responsible for every aspect of day-to-day operations including staffing, advertising, bookkeeping, and community networking. The manager trains and supervises **two full-time** and **six part-time employees** at any given time.

Community Relations

A census of second-hand clothing stores in Wilmington in 1999 was conducted by the church as part of the planning process for the Bargain Box outreach ministry. There were 31 thrift stores at that time of which five were not-for-profits. The Bargain Box is different in that it is run by paid staff rather than volunteers and does not raise funds for only one sponsoring agent. The store maintains the highest retail standards, giving it the look and feel (and smell) of a high-end boutique. The Bargain Box models and teaches the practical application of sound business principles within a spiritual context. It ministers to the needy through employment and job training for employees transitioning into the job market and encourages their spiritual development. As an outreach ministry of the church, it supports a wide range of existing charities. Bargain Box works with government agencies, with churches across many denominational, racial, and geographic lines, and with private religious and social service organizations. The Bargain Box builds good community relationships by involving volunteers from diverse backgrounds including: Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Mormon, Baptist, Presbyterian, as well as UNC-W fraternity members and other individuals. Our shoppers come from all walks of life.