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Restoring Cars, Restoring Lives

Sam Kuzmishin, a 16-year-old Sophomore at Winchester Thurston High School, found a unique way to give back to his community and help those in need. One day, a few months ago, he was thinking about all the ways that the COVID pandemic has negatively-impacted our world, our country, and our local communities, and he wanted to find a way to help.

“People are losing their jobs,” he said, “and some aren’t able to pay rent. I just wanted to find a way to help as many people as possible get back on their feet.”

Sam and his dad, John Kuzmishin, love working on cars together and fixing them up in their garage. “It’s really, really rewarding when you figure out what’s wrong and how you can fix it,” Sam explained.

Sam thought maybe he and his dad could take in dilapidated cars, restore them, and offer them at a deep discount to those in need.

“The more I thought about it,” he said, “I realized that reliable transportation is such an important step to independence and getting your life back on track. It helps people commute to work, get groceries, take kids to school. And if you don’t have a car you can depend on, it really limits the jobs available to you.”

Sam started contacting local nonprofits to find an organization he could work with, and City Mission called him back.

“We get calls intermittently from people wanting to donate cars to us,” said City Mission’s Director of Hope Enterprises, Mark Vinoverski. Some of those donated vehicles are not operational. With limited space and no one dedicated to restoring the vehicles, the Mission could only store a limited number of them at any given time.

Additionally, as homeless residents transition out of City Mission and into independent living, reliable transportation is often a very important step in their progress, so the Mission was really the perfect fit for Sam’s plan.

“John and Sam have a real heart for the Mission,” said Vinoverski. “They really want the cars to go to our residents and help people in need.”

A couple of months ago, Sam and his dad picked up their first car from the City Mission warehouse, a 2006 Buick Rainier with 155,000 miles. They hauled the vehicle on a trailer back to their home in

Pittsburgh where they have a lift in their garage and a safe space to work. The car had a short circuit on the driver's side door and a non-functioning air suspension system, among other issues. They purchased a control panel for the door, new suspension air bags, and a new air compressor with their own money and installed them. They also replaced the windshield, fixed non-functioning windshield wipers and performed preventative maintenance.

Once the father and son team had restored the vehicle, they brought it back to the staff at the Mission, who already had a resident lined up to buy it. The resident purchased the vehicle, which will help him get to and from work, at a deep discount.

"We want the residents to purchase the vehicles, so it's like a real-life situation for them," explained Vinoverski. "They learn to save money. They feel like they have ownership. It's not just handed to them. They earn it."

Sam and his dad already picked up their second car and have begun working on it.

Sam is working hard to acquire funding from companies, sponsors, and foundations to help purchase parts and fund the project. He is making contacts, writing grants, and building a website to document the impact their work is having in the community.

"We just want to help people in need help themselves...one at a time," said Sam, "especially during COVID."

Visit www.driveon412.com to learn more about this project. Want to find your own, unique way of making a difference for those in need? Contact City Mission at citymission.org or 724-222-8530 to find ways you can help.

About City Mission: For over 75 years, City Mission has sheltered, healed, and restored the homeless to independent living—without discrimination. City Mission's comprehensive program addresses both short-term needs like food and shelter, and long-term needs, including drug and alcohol counseling, mental health and medical treatment, legal aid, and employment training. City Mission's goal is to help each man, woman, mother with children, or veteran who walks through our doors to become a healthy, productive member of society. With your help, we can help our residents renew their lives.