

## Purse Project benefits Mother Teresa Home

by Patrick J. Buechi

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**An assortment of lovely purses donated to the Mother Teresa Home by Susan Riley, owner of Susan Riley Design Inc. and organizer of the Purse Project. (Dan Cappellazzo/Staff Photographer)**

Every woman needs a good purse. That notion led a local graphic designer on a mission to make sure women in transition had the proper handbag.

"It was just a thought," Susan Riley said, thinking back to last Thanksgiving. "I was thinking how thankful I am for my life and what can I do that can help other people. Every woman I know has a closet full of purses that they no longer use, that they most likely spent a lot of money to purchase, then go tired of."

She asked her friends and family for all their gently used purses, which she filled with personal care items, for a planned giveaway.

"My thought was, if I saw a homeless woman or if there was a shelter that homeless women had access to, that I would give them one of these purses and it would have everything you need," she explained. When she told her plan to others, they liked idea so much, they pitched in with soap, shampoo and gift cards. "The next thing you know, people are dropping off bars of soap to me, little shampoo bottles." One fellow parishioner gave her a gift card to the Dollar Store. Western New York Dental gave her 50 dental kits with toothpaste and toothbrushes and floss for the first 50 purses. Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Youth Group pitched in as well.

Realizing that handing out purses on the street to homeless women would be impractical, Riley gave the purses to Gerard Place, which provides housing, supportive services, community education and outreach for single-parent families trying to break to cycle of poverty.

After making that delivery last fall, Riley found herself with such an overflow of purses, that she decided to do another purse project.

"Many of the purses were summer and spring purses. So, in the fall, I didn't want to give these beautiful summer bags out that people weren't going to use," she said. Riley is a designer. She knows the difference between spring and fall purses.

She postponed her planned Easter distribution due to the COVID pandemic. With July 1 being the fifth anniversary of her mother's passing, Riley wanted to do something that would honor her mother by helping others. So, she brought 30 purses to Mother Teresa Home on July 2 as part of the Remembering Rose Purse Project.

Opened in 2016, [Mother Teresa Home](#) provides shelter, service and education referrals to women who have experienced pressure to end their pregnancies.

Riley heard about Mother Teresa Home from a fellow parishioner at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Harris Hill. "I'm a real big follower of St. Teresa and had just read a book about her life. I thought, there you go, another sign," Riley said.

The purses came during a warm and sunny day, when the East Side home was nearly empty. Due to COVID-19 guidelines, social service agencies were unable to place anyone in transitional housing. Two families had just moved out, leaving Tanika and her son Kenzo living with Cheryl and David Calire, who oversee the home.

"I'm always thrilled when some news gets out about the Mother Teresa Home. So, I was thrilled when, through another party, Susan had heard about us. I'm always excited when it involves directly with our moms and our babies," said Cheryl Calire, executive director of the diocesan Office of Pro-Life Activities.

Calire has found people are very eager to help care for the needs of the babies, but often don't think of the mothers' needs.

"Sometimes we forget the moms who have made the decision to choose life, the moms who have made a lot of sacrifices to be here," she said. "Something like the Purse Project is perfect, because it's our way to tell Tanika - You're valuable, you're loved, you're part of everything we do here. So, I was really excited about it."

Tanika has been at the Mother Teresa Home since September 2019. Kenzo was born in December.

"It's been so peaceful. I was able to clear my mind a lot and really focus on my future. It has helped me to be a good mother," she said about her time there.