



The Mustard Seed volunteers restore furniture and beds so that needy families can use them.

Planting a Seed

By Kevin Fritz

The Mustard Seed of Central Florida continues to provide hope — and a little comfort — along the way.

At one millimeter in diameter, a typical mustard seed is so small it can easily be passed over by the casual eye. But it's the essence behind that tiny grain that offers hope to those who may find themselves at unfamiliar crossroads with nowhere else to turn.

In the Orlando area, it's the Mustard Seed of Central Florida that's behind that hope, rebuilding lives of families when they need it most. But for all the assistance the non-profit has been able to offer since the 1980s, the Mustard Seed, which turned 28 this year, still seems to lack the recognition such longevity typically brings.

"It seems everyone has heard of the Mustard Seed, but many are not sure what it is," says Executive Director **Kathy Baldwin**. "The Mustard Seed is the only furniture and clothing bank in Central Florida."

Baldwin, who is relatively new to the organization, accepting the leadership position earlier this year, is steadfast in educating the public in everything the Mustard Seed does and stands for in the community. Mainly supported by fundraising, grants and gifts, without subsidies or United Way funding, she knows her challenge of meeting payroll, keeping the lights on and maintaining two trucks that visit 15-18 houses a day would be heightened if more people knew how many lives rely on their services.

Indeed, it's the Mustard Seed the Red Cross calls on after a disaster to replace furniture and household items such as chairs, tables, toys, dishes and linens. "Some families lose

everything," Baldwin says. "We are the ones who help everyday Central Floridians who have little or nothing due to a natural disaster, divorce, medical hardship, or an economic recession."

The difference between the Mustard Seed and other organizations that accept household items is significant: Furniture is never resold and any unfit items are recycled, so virtually nothing ends up in landfills. Clothes are offered in its thrift shop for pennies on the dollar.

Orlando resident **Charles Lints** discovered the Mustard Seed when he needed it the most. "The folks are very kind, as well as helpful in giving a man like me a hand up," he says. "And not just a handout. God will bless all at the Mustard Seed."

To manage all the donations that come from the general public, as well as from restaurants, hotels and theme parks — such as a regular bevy of strollers from Walt Disney World — Baldwin has a workforce of 15 employees and averages 150 volunteers per month. They are the heart and soul of the organization.

Erik Ramos, Mustard Seed's associate recycling director and a single father of twin boys turning three, took a job at Mustard Seed after they had assisted his mother. "I feel I am doing something productive," he says. "It's hard work, but I like it." **L**

For more information about The Mustard Seed, visit our website at CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.