

Friends Together receives van from Wright & Filippis

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By DIANE SPEER - Lifestyles Editor , The Alpena News

Thanks to the generosity of Wright & Filippis, Friends Together in Alpena is the proud new recipient of a van to be used for transporting cancer patients to and from medical appointments.

"We believe very strongly in supporting the communities where we serve," said Tom Hopkins, department head of distribution for Wright & Filippis.

Hopkins presented the keys to a 2003 Ford Windstar Minivan on Tuesday to Judy Burns, founder and director of Friends Together. She praised Wright & Filippis for the company's willingness to step in and fill the need

to have reliable transportation available for people seeking cancer treatments, particularly to the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center.

"It will touch so many lives you don't even know how many," Burns said.

Friends Together was instrumental in obtaining a new model van last year that currently is used by cancer patients coming to Alpena Regional Medical Center Cancer Center from a three-county area. That van was the result of a collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Besser Foundation, Alpena Regional Medical Center Development Council, ARMC Cancer Center and Friends Together.

According to Burns and Friends Together Administrator Bill Morford, that first van receives heavy usage transporting patients to their appointments, thereby making it unavailable for special medical-related trips to U of M, ARMC's partner facility.



Friends Together representatives were on hand Tuesday morning to accept the keys to a 2003 Ford Windstar Minivan donated by Wright & Filippis. Pictured from left are Penny Barton, Susan Yachcik, Bill Morford, Melissa Burns, Judy Burns and Tom Hopkins, department head of distribution for Wright & Filippis

This latest vehicle came about through a behind-the-scenes effort by Penny Barton and her daughter, Susan Yachcik. Both women are cancer survivors and current members of a Friends Together support group.

Burns said the mother-daughter duo made note of the fact six members in their support group routinely require transportation to U of M. Getting there can be difficult to work out because of the first van's constant usage at ARMC.

Barton then decided to take matters into her own hands and contact A.J. Filippis, president of Wright & Filippis, who she has known since he was a child.

"My original phone call to him was, 'Do you know of any organization that donates vans to other organizations that need them?' He said that he thought that Wright & Filippis could do that," said a clearly pleased Barton.

Friends Together now hopes to coordinate appointments with the social worker on staff at U of M so that those needing to travel to Ann Arbor can perhaps go on the same days, thereby cutting down on travel expenses. Patients being able to travel together also would provide added moral support.

"It helps them to connect among themselves on the way down and to share their experiences," Barton said.

Although Friends Together is quite grateful for the gift of the van, additional monetary donations for vehicle upkeep and gas still will be needed. Anyone willing to help is encouraged to contact the Friends Together office at 356-3231.

As for Wright & Filippis, Hopkins maintains that his company was pleased to be able to assist with such a worthwhile request.

"This is right in line with our core set of values," Hopkins said.