

FreshWater

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RITA KUEBER | TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2019

Flower power: This budding nonprofit has recycled 6,200+ bouquets for those who need it most

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Elaborate floral arrangements bring beauty and panache to weddings, comfort and condolences to funerals—but what happens to the flowers the next day?

Sue Buddenbaum is rewriting the answer to that question with [BigHearted Blooms](#), a nonprofit that has been redistributing recycled flowers to assisted living homes, nursing homes, and hospitals since May 2018.

As a cancer survivor and former caretaker, Buddenbaum knows all too well that the simple but tangible gesture of giving flowers can brighten patients' days, make them stronger, and potentially inspire them to beat their disease.

"BigHearted Blooms is about flowers, yes, but it's really about helping people fight life challenges," Buddenbaum says.

Buddenbaum's initial inspiration was [Random Acts of Flowers](#), a Knoxville, Tennessee-based nonprofit that Buddenbaum approached about opening a location in Cleveland. Though they weren't prepared to expand at the time, they mentored Buddenbaum to create her own nonprofit using their model. Today BHB is one of 30 such mission-matched organizations from Vermont to California, along with Canada and the United Kingdom.



BHB's entire staff is comprised of weekend volunteers who perform three basic tasks: picking up arrangements, reassembling bouquets, and delivering vases of recycled flowers. At its workspace at 5122 St. Clair Ave. in Cleveland, shifts of 10 to 15 people repurpose donated flowers. Volunteers range from grade school students to retirees.

"These efforts take no talent or training," Buddenbaum says, "although we do try to have everyone deliver at least once, so they can see how their efforts affect the recipients."

In addition to grateful smiles, there are eco-benefits to this effort as well, as BHB intercepts flowers headed for the trash. Considering that the average wedding produces 400 pounds of garbage, averting waste is increasingly important to green-minded brides (and continues to be a strong focus in the convention and special event industries). With BHB's approach, those faded blooms typically end up in a compost bin—not a landfill—since health care facilities tend to recycle.

Over 17 months, BHB estimates they have delivered 6,240 vases to veterans, cancer patients, Alzheimer's patients, nursing

home residents, and more in 172 locations from Chardon to Strongsville. So far, deliveries have depended on guidance from volunteers, but they take requests, too.

"We've barely scratched the surface of places we could go," Buddenbaum acknowledges.

As a labor of love, the nonprofit relies solely on donations to cover its modest costs. In July, BHB received a \$1,000 grant from the Cleveland chapter of the worldwide [Awesome Foundation](#), an angel fund that [backs "the dreamers and doers making our community awesome."](#) That financial gift—along with proceeds from an Oct. 4 fundraiser—will enable the purchase of a much needed walk-in cooler that will better preserve donated flora.

The overall goal? To not only stretch the lifespan of fragrant flowers, but maximize the lives they touch, says Buddenbaum: "It's about touching people with an act of kindness to recognize them, and to let them know they are not alone."

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