

YMCA opens doors to those who cannot pay

Financial aid lets a local couple dedicated to helping the needy get fit despite their own hardship

By Nancy Arcayna

George and Bea Piliwale were self-described “middle-class snobs” who never dreamed they would be living in their van.

“We had four kids, two dogs and a home,” said Bea Piliwale, 74. Her husband owned his own photography and videography business, and Bea was a dance instructor and stay-at-home mom.

Then a series of unfortunate events caused them to lose their Ewa Beach home in 1985. The couple packed their belongings into their car and set up camp at Neal S. Blaisdell Park in Waimalu with just \$10 to their name. George Piliwale, 75, tried to start landscaping and rubbish-hauling businesses, but both failed, so now the couple lives on monthly income of just \$440 in Social Security payments that allow them to buy basic necessities.

Twenty-six years later they are still homeless but certainly not bitter or despondent over their predicament. The Piliwales, married for 51 years, say they are grateful for all of the blessings in their lives and have all they need.

George believes it was “God’s plan” that they lose all of their material belongings so they could focus on giving back to others. In 1992 he started the Jesus Christ Gathering His People Ministry using two vans and a tarp. He continues to hold church services every Saturday at Blaisdell Park, and both George and Bea remain dedicated to helping others.

“Sleeping in the van, we are able to help people 24/7,” said George.

It’s not uncommon for folks to come call-



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 George and Bea Piliwale have been married for 51 years and homeless for 26 years.

ing in the middle of the night seeking help.

“I’m not surprised because that’s when people need help most,” he said. “Neighbors might not like people knocking at our door at all hours of the night, so the van has worked out. ... We share food. Kids come to talk to us who are hooked on drugs.”

The couple has found a second home at the Waipahu YMCA. George saw a flier at a grocery store that indicated financial aid was available for YMCA memberships. Once they were approved, the couple began to reap the benefits of a more active lifestyle. Bea has lost 19 pounds, and George said the exercise improved his heart health after he suffered a heart attack and underwent quintuple bypass surgery in 1996.

“I haven’t exercised regularly since I got out of the (Army) in 1957,” he said. “It gives me lots of energy. We go at least five times a week. It’s nice to have a warm shower.”

The Piliwales agree their YMCA memberships allow them to rejuvenate and continue what they do.

“The YMCA is our family. Everyone is willing to help everyone, and we have been welcomed from day one, even though they know our situation,” said Bea.

George added, “We deal with very drastic situations, but by receiving all that we do from the Y, it makes it easier for us to do our work. We can’t give to others if we are running on empty.”

The Piliwales are well liked and well respected in the Y community, according to Keola Taniguchi, branch executive director of YMCA of Honolulu. “Bea will hug and kiss everyone she meets and comes into contact with,” Taniguchi said. “She will make you feel good about yourself and not make a big deal of it.”

And George always asks friends and strangers alike, “How are you today?”

The Piliwales received financial assistance under the “Y’s Membership for All” program. The local organization is able to provide financial aid to more than 5,000 members each year because of its annual support campaign.

“The Y is dedicated to strengthening our community by providing access to our facilities, programs and services to everyone regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, religion or ability to pay,” said Jim Yates, YMCA metropolitan board chairman.

This year’s campaign theme is “We All Need the Y.”



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 George and Bea Piliwale exercise regularly at the Waipahu YMCA through the Y’s “Membership for All” program, which offers financial aid to those who cannot afford regular monthly fees.

“Our goal is to raise close to \$1 million to ensure anyone who needs the Y is not turned away,” Yates said.

Most people are familiar with the YMCA’s after-school and summer fun programs, fitness classes and swimming lessons, “but we also reach out to Hawaii’s most vulnerable,” he said.

“In addition to providing assistance to people like Bea and George, we also provide free dinners to students attending schools in low-income communities. We operate one of the longest-running international student exchange programs with Hiroshima YMCA. We teach the importance of cooking healthy and maintaining an active lifestyle to hundreds of middle- and high-schoolers throughout Oahu, and we provide drug intervention services to more than 4,000 at-risk teens each year.”

Y’S ‘MEMBERSHIP FOR ALL’

To donate:

- » Visit www.ymcahonolulu.org.
- » Send checks payable to “YMCA of Honolulu” to YMCA of Honolulu, P.O. Box 1921, Honolulu, HI 96805.
- » Drop off donations at a local branch.