

# Free car for a needy nominee

There's a mystery afoot, and it has Paul Barr scratching his head. Me, too, for that matter.

Barr is the Newport News businessman who for the second year in a row is giving away a refurbished car to a deserving individual in the community through his Wheels of Change program.

That's right — giving it away, for the measly price of \$1.

The only catch is that you can't nominate yourself. Somebody else has to nominate

you. Barr reads the nomination letters and chooses the one individual who needs and deserves the car the most.

By this time last year, Barr had about 70 letters nominating neighbors, friends or family members.

This year, with the Nov. 29 deadline coming up fast, he's gotten only about 10. And that's the mystery.

There are plenty of individuals out there who desperately need a car, especially in this ragged economy. Barr's theory is that residents might feel last year's winner set the bar a little too high.

This was a woman who overcame drug addiction to become a major volunteer in her church — transporting children to summer camp, making sure they had clothes or food. Even on a fixed income, she'd help feed the homeless. She launched an "anti-crime" summer program in her neighborhood.

"People are (probably) thinking, 'I haven't entered any drug rehab or have

any anti-crime programs going on. I haven't fed the homeless or delivered food to needy people,'" Barr speculated last week. "That's the only thing I can think — that, man, I can't match up to that."

So far, vehicles have come to Barr through his Guaranteed Auto Service. Last year, it was a refurbished 2002 Dodge Intrepid. This year, it's a 2003 Saturn LW200 wagon signed over by a sailor when the engine went out. Barr replaced the engine with a low-mileage version.

Barr provided me copies of some of the nomination letters, which indicate there are, indeed, struggling individuals out there:

■ A single mother of a grown daughter who's a full-time emergency relief worker, part-time college student and volunteer at her church nursery. Her car is badly in need of repair, but she can't afford to have it fixed.

■ A young woman who works full-time, yet is very active in her church with the feeding ministry for the homeless, as a teacher to young girls and as a praise and worship leader. "She is a young lady who will put herself last in order to give to others." The bus is her only transportation.

■ A husband who's a "selfless, loving man" who works all day, helps his daughter with homework, once worked as home health aide and cared for his ailing parents until their deaths. "Often when his patients or parents needed anything, (he) would 'walk miles' for them ... literally!"

■ An older woman who was a caretaker for her aging father and aunt now "helps anyone that she can. ...She has shared what food she has if she knows that they are hungry and even though she is in need

herself." She's on Social Security, has no car and no way to get to doctor appointments, the grocery store and the like. She can't afford public transportation, and is unable to carry packages or walk more than a few hundred feet at a time.

Barr launched Wheels of Change last year and intends to make it an annual event. His own father was the inspiration — a modest, hardworking cabinetmaker who took the bus to work every day because he couldn't afford a vehicle, and who helped others whenever he could.

Barr is a firm believer in the power of a vehicle to transform lives.

Many welfare-to-work programs find them essential to success, and a nonprofit Good News Garage (GNG) program run throughout New England by Lutheran Social Services has been refurbishing thousands of donated vehicles and providing them at low-cost to low-income individuals since 1994. According to the GNG website, polls show that, a year after receiving their car, 89 percent of clients experience increased economic opportunity, and 86 percent experienced improved quality of life.

Barr wants to enhance lives on the Peninsula, too. He just needs to get nominations of folks who are "doing what they can."

"They don't have to be a superstar," Barr says. "They just have to care and be out there helping in the community. The person they nominate, they may see in that car on Dec. 2. It can make a big difference to an individual or a family."

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Opinion