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ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY RYANNE NASON

(From left) Will Rosborough, board president; Rusty Roberts, pantry manager; Rick Traub, board; Linda Slaven, assistant pantry manager; and Gene Grindle, volunteer.

Tree of Life Food Pantry Marks 25th Anniversary

BY JENNIFER OSBORN

BLUE HILL — The Tree of Life Food Pantry and Turnstyle Resale Shop is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

The organization hosted an open house with the Blue Hill Area Chamber of Commerce and the Blue Hill Co-op on Jan. 19.

"It was a great evening, it really was," said Rusty Roberts, the pantry manager. "People kind of walked around with their jaws hanging open. They were so surprised at the store and they couldn't believe the food pantry."

The Tree of Life is working on a history and a website so people will know how the pantry and shop started and what's happened, Roberts said. Three people who played a major role in the organization have died in the

past couple years, she said. They include Lena Robertson, Serita Brown and Florence Dodge.

Dodge donated land on South Street for the first building, which was first next to Tradewinds.

Roberts said it's her understanding that the clothing venture came first. Some people in town needed some clothing, so donations were gathered. Then someone brought in some vegetables to distribute.

"It was a very low-key adventure," Roberts said.

Jan Marville has also been with the organization since the beginning.

"We have been blessed all these years and I think it's been a wonderful addition to the community," Marville said. "It's so great that the clothing pretty much pays for the food."

When Marville began helping, the group was working in the basement of the congregational church.

From there they moved to an unheated garage on Water Street where The Barnacle is now located. Not only was there no heat, there was no running water.

Finally, a heated space opened up underneath what is now New Cargoes.

"We had heat and a bathroom, which was an absolute delight," Marville said.

The organization landed on South Street after Dodge donated land.

However, when Rite-Aid came to town, the retailer wanted to be next to Tradewinds and asked the food pantry to move.

That's when Jan's husband, Bob Marville, got involved.

"I met with the developer and said if you want

to be next to Tradewinds, we'll move, but here's the deal," Bob said, referring to the condition that Rite-Aid build a bigger building for the pantry.

"They said, 'You're asking for a lot,'" Bob recalled. "We said, 'We like where we are.'"

Rite-Aid relented and the Tree of Life got a bigger facility, which is on the opposite side of the pharmacy from Tradewinds.

Yet another expansion occurred in 2006.

Today, the pantry is serving more people than ever.

Roberts said the pantry serves over 200 families a week. When she began keeping track of the numbers of people being helped, she had 300 names on her computer. That list has grown to over 1,300.

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