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FENTON

Neighbors

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**Meet the
Strygulecs:**
HELPING NEIGHBORS,
SHARING HOPE

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Meet the Strygulecs:

HELPING NEIGHBORS, SHARING HOPE

By Bonnie Birchmeier

Bob and Jennifer Strygulec have spent the last 33 years building a life that weaves together faith, family, and a deep commitment to their neighbors. Today, many in our community know them as the founders and directors of the Fenton Center of Hope. But their story began in a place that might surprise you: the very first Walmart in Genesee County.

Bob was the store manager, and Jennifer served as the community involvement coordinator. Their time working together was brief, Walmart had a rule that managers couldn't date associates, but that didn't stop their relationship from growing. Just eight months after meeting, Bob and Jennifer were married, beginning a partnership that has now spanned over three decades, three children, five grandchildren, and a ministry that has touched thousands of lives.

From the very beginning, three things have anchored the Strygulecs: God first, then family, and then serving their community. As they raised their children, Steven, Sarah, and Sophie, they were intentional about modeling what it meant to love and care for their neighbors. Outreach wasn't just something they did on the weekends; it was woven into the rhythm of their family life. They helped organize and serve at community events, volunteered in local ministries, and made sure their kids saw firsthand what compassion in action looked like.

That desire to serve eventually led them to help start a small food pantry on the property of a local church. It was humble, just a single-car garage, but it quickly became a lifeline for neighbors in Fenton, Linden, and Holly. The pantry opened twice a week, and from day one, Bob and Jennifer were determined that it would be different. Instead of handing out pre-packed bags or boxes of random items, they designed the pantry so that people could choose their own food, just like in a grocery store.

They believed deeply that every person who walked through the door should be treated with dignity and respect. A choice-based system might have been more work, but it honored the people they were serving. Over time, word spread, and more and more families began coming for help.

One evening stands out in their memory. A woman who often visited the pantry arrived with her adult daughter and her teenage granddaughter, who was pregnant. All three of them needed food. After they finished shopping and left, Bob turned to Jennifer and said quietly, "We aren't really making a lasting difference in these people's lives. We're just putting a Band-Aid on a problem."

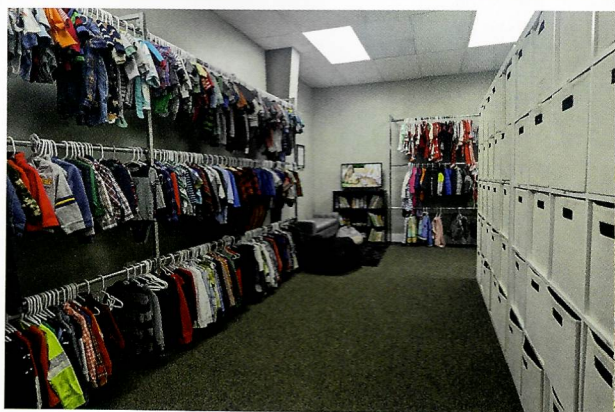
That moment became a turning point.

Bob began dreaming of something more, a place that didn't just provide food for today, but tools for tomorrow. A place where people could find mentoring, resources, education, and relationships that would help them break cycles of crisis and move forward in life.

At the time, Bob was working as a financial advisor at a local bank, and Jennifer was involved in her family's interior design business. Life was busy. Their son was in his first year of college, and their two daughters were still in school. Starting a nonprofit wasn't on the immediate timeline.

Then one afternoon, Bob called Jennifer from work and told her he was coming home. Alarmed, she worried he might be sick or had lost his job. But when he walked through the door, he calmly explained that he believed it was time to do what he felt God had been calling them to do for years: help their neighbors in need full-time.

By then, Bob had also become a licensed pastor, something that hadn't fully made sense to Jennifer until that moment. Looking



back, they could see how all the pieces of their story had been preparing them for what was next.

It took a great deal of faith to move forward sooner than they had planned. In 2016, they officially became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. At first, it seemed like things were falling perfectly into place. They learned they would be receiving a grant from a local foundation that would provide a small salary, allowing Bob to transition fully into the work. But shortly after, they were told the funds had been reallocated to address the Flint water crisis.

Instead of giving up, Bob picked up a mop. He began cleaning for a friend's commercial cleaning company to help make ends meet while they continued building the ministry. The church they were partnering with blessed them with the use of a small house on the property for offices and space to start a baby closet. Through fundraising and a lot of volunteer labor, they built a pole barn in the backyard to house the growing food pantry.

As they worked, the community responded. Volunteers began showing up, first a handful, then dozens, until the Center's volunteer base and the number of families they served both grew rapidly. Soon they were not only operating a busy food pantry and baby closet but hosting life skills classes and Bible studies as well. Classes grew in number, relationships formed, and the Strygulecs began to see their long-held dreams for the community becoming reality.

In 2021, a new chapter began when the Center of Hope relocated to a larger property next door to Camp Copneconic on North Fenton Road. The new site includes a large main building that houses offices, the baby closet, a spacious meeting area, a conference room, and a food pantry that now resembles a small grocery store. The property also includes three large homes that previously served as residential facilities for juvenile boys.

The Strygulecs have a new vision for those homes: transforming them into emergency shelter for women and children. Their goal is not simply to provide a bed for a night, but to create a program that helps women stabilize, heal, and move forward in life. Just as with the pantry, their aim is lasting change, not just temporary relief.

Today, the Center of Hope offers far more than food. Their client-choice pantry has been awarded Gold Level Certification by the National Pantry Program, recognizing that it provides nutritious choices and education to support healthy eating. Their baby closet

has grown into a full parenting program. Parents who participate meet monthly with mentors, complete lessons chosen from over 300 topics, and receive free diapers for the month as well as clothing for their children ages five and under.

The Center also offers free biblical counseling for adults and couples, along with a mentoring program for those who need extra support. In addition, the Center of Hope offers a GED program in partnership with a local school district for adults who desire to complete their high school education. Earning this credential can open doors to new types of employment and create opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach.

A variety of groups and gatherings meet regularly, including a men's breakfast, women's brunch, veterans' lunch, and a support group for survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

Recently, the Center partnered with the YWCA of Greater Flint to make these crucial support services more widely available in our area.

Through all of this, one theme runs strong: meeting people where they are and offering them opportunities to grow. The Center of Hope's motto, "Building community, strengthening families, and sharing hope"—is more than a tagline. It's the heartbeat of everything Bob and Jennifer do.

They often say that what they're building is just the foundation of something that will outlast them, serving Fenton and the surrounding communities for generations to come. They still believe, just as they did standing in that little garage pantry years ago, that God has a plan for each person's life, and that every man, woman, and child deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

The Strygulecs invite you to learn more about the Fenton Center of Hope by visiting their website at www.fentoncenterofhope.org or by stopping in for a tour to see it all in person. On their website, you'll find links if you're interested in volunteering or otherwise supporting, as well as information for anyone who may be in need of their services. Bob and Jennifer are quick to say they have "the best volunteers and donors in the world" and insist they could not do this work without them.

This holiday season and always, Bob and Jennifer Strygulec, and the entire Center of Hope community, are here to share one simple, powerful message with their neighbors: there is hope.