Miami Herald

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2022 | WISH LIST | MIAMIHERALD.COM

She's a 'crochet machine' and legally blind but that hasn't stopped her from giving. Now it's your turn

by Howard Cohen

Angela Phang embodies the Wish Book spirit. She may not apply the Wish Book name to her generosity, but Phang, a 71-year-old student of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired Senior Group Activities program, is a giver. Wish Book, the nonprofit seasonal effort by the *Miami Herald* and *el Nuevo Herald* that has raised funds for those in need for 41 years, is a giver.

Both give and yet both do so despite increasing challenges.

photo credit: cjuste@miamiherald.com

Angela Phang, 71, a client of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind who was born with congenital cataracts and retina problems, and is legally blind, crochets a scarf on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2022. Phang has been a student of Lighthouse's Senior Group Activities (SGA) program since the 1980s and crochets scarfs to donate to charities.

AN AWARD-WINNING ARTIST

Phang was born with congenital cataracts and retina problems. She is unable to focus and is legally blind, said Betty Chavarria, manager of the vocational transition program for the Miami Lighthouse. Chavarria nominated Phang for this season's Wish Book, which officially begins on Thanksgiving.

Despite her vision challenges, Phang crochets colorful afghans. Her work has been on exhibit at Coral Gables Museum. She won top honors in a national arts competition sponsored by Kentucky's American Printing House for the Blind.

Phang donates most of her carefully crafted afghans to raise funds for local charities, including for Lighthouse's White Cane Day, Knights of Columbus and programs that combat breast cancer. Sometimes she gives the blankets and shawls as gifts. Recipients have included Aaron Hill, her arts and fitness instructor at Lighthouse, and Miami-Dade Commissioner Sally Heyman in honor of her retirement in November from local politics after 20 years.

But Phang, who lives in a condominium in Miami Lakes that was left to her by her father, could use help, too.

A DAMAGED KITCHEN

Her kitchen cupboards are basically destroyed. Years ago, rainwater seeped into cabinets that are now warped and cracked, Chavarria said. "An eyesore," Phang added. In addition, water from a jug spilled and spread across her cabinet, a vanity and even the stove, rendering the stove inoperable since 2019. Phang, who lives alone, cooks her meals with a rice cooker or the microwave. She does not have the means to replace damaged appliances or cabinetry.

Phang also pays for the yarn and other materials she needs to crochet the gifts she so often donates. "She's giving so much to other people and she has less than most people she's giving to," said Hill.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

"Wish Book is the part of our public service mission that focuses on connecting and building up communities across South Florida. When I think about the many years that our readers have supported the Wish Book I am grateful and I'm reminded of the memorable and inspiring moments that giving has changed, even saved, the lives of children and families in our community," said Monica Richardson, executive editor of the *Miami Herald* and *el Nuevo Herald*.

These gifts can be, as in Phang's case, new cabinetry, paint, perhaps other repairs and financial donations to cover the cost of yarn and living expenses.

For others it can mean car repairs, a laptop to help students study, help moving a family from a shelter into their own home or assistance in purchasing a handicap-accessible van, Richardson noted.

"We are so very proud of the Wish Book program and its successes with bringing some level of support to those in need," said Bob McFarlin, general manager for *Miami Herald*, *el Nuevo Herald* and *The Bradenton Herald*. "Our work as journalists, business people, leaders, and members of (the) community can only be done when we serve our own.

"The Wish Book is the culmination of the community supporting others in the community, and we're just the middle man." Sometimes the donations make a difference simply by putting a smile on someone's face.

INSPIRED TO INSPIRING

Phang, for instance, flashes frequent smiles as she chats up a visitor to Lighthouse, all the while nimbly hooking yarn into another work of art. It's hard not to marvel at her multitasking. "I taught myself back when I was 35," she says. "Now I'm 71. But it took me like a long time to practice all the stitches. So even though I started at 35 I didn't really make that big project until, like, maybe five years later."

Her pieces, she says, can take weeks, sometimes months depending on her schedule or how many projects she takes on.

Born in Jamaica of Chinese heritage, Phang emigrated to Miami-Dade's Westchester area with her parents in 1974.

"I'm able to get around," she said. "I just know how to get around. I mostly see colors if you're close by and if you're not moving around."

In the early 1980s, she sought inspiration from another doer. A student in Lighthouse's senior activities program, she went to a retreat for the blind.

"Somebody pointed her out to me, that this person over there is blind and she's crocheting. Everybody was admiring her work, crowding around her. And I said, 'Wait a minute, if she can do it, and she's blind, and I'm not really blind, I can do it.' She inspired me to learn," Phang said.

"Also, when I was little I used to see my sister crocheting these little doilies with those fine threads, and I could not figure it out," she said.

But Phang was, and is, determined.

"She is a very, very special woman as you can probably tell," said Hill, the fitness and art instructor. "She's super artistic. She will be crocheting and she works out. She works on her crochet at the same time. She is a nonstop crochet machine," Hill said, chuckling.

Most often, Phang doesn't know who wins her crochet work at a charity auction so she doesn't always get direct feedback or witness the joy a presentation of a Phang original afghan can give to a recipient. When someone does say something nice about her efforts, as Hill does, Phang just smiles and says, "I take it in stride. I do. I'm humble about it." She is humble, Hill says. "She doesn't realize she's not a crocheter – she's an artist. Her spirit, her positive energy makes us very proud. She's very giving. She's always willing to help the other students. She's a real light," Hill said.

He says that Phang uses Miami-Dade County's Special Transportation Service and knows how to navigate Metrorail. "She'll go to events on her own. She'll go to Orlando to a blind convention on her own. It's pretty amazing. The only thing I've been worried about her is at home. Her apartment definitely needs a lot of help."

Chavarria is equally effusive about Phang. "She's just an inspiration for all of us."

And if Phang should receive a hearty Wish Book response?

"Oh, she will be ecstatic just to know that people are out there who actually care about others and are willing to give to others – just as she will," Chavarria said. "It will mean a lot to her to have that, especially now for the holidays. She lives on her own. She has no family here. So having that support from the community will be a great way to inspire her to continue to do her work."

Last year, Wish Book supporters put a smile on the face of 16-year-old Jayden Ferrell, blind since birth, who wanted assistance that would allow him to live and navigate more independently, Richardson noted.

"His, along with others, was a smile worth supporting. Every year the stories are heartfelt and every year the need seems greater than ever," Richardson said.