

## Pennsylvania Man Helps Keep Feet of the Homeless Warm and Dry Through His ‘Joy of Sox’

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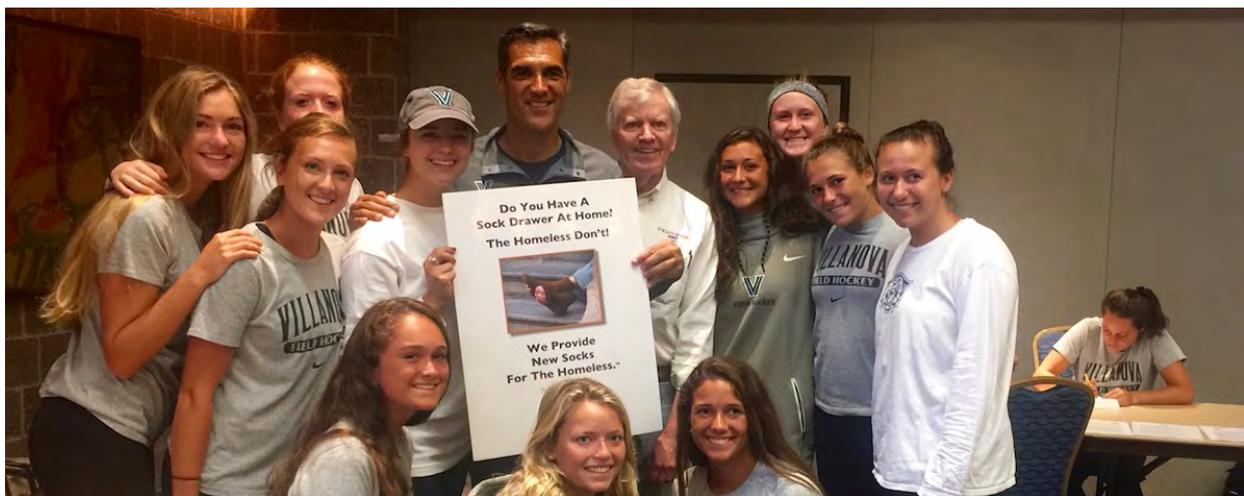
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For most of his life, Tom Costello Jr. had a deep fear of homeless people.

When walking in downtown Philadelphia, he would go out of his way to avoid them, and the thought of driving his wife, Nancy, to a local soup kitchen for an afternoon of volunteering was enough to bring on a panic attack.

“I know it sounds completely irrational, but I had this terrible phobia,” Costello, 68, tells **PEOPLE**. “Everything about homeless people made me feel extremely nervous and uncomfortable.”

Then in 2010, Costello, an adjunct business professor at [Montgomery County Community College](#), in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania was finally convinced by his wife to get out of the car and venture inside a church to help serve a meal to several dozen homeless men, women and children.



**Jay Wright, head coach of Villanova Basketball NCAA Championship team, holding the poster. Tom Costello, Jr. on right.**

“I felt panicked, but I took a few deep breaths and I did it,” he says, “and while I was there, a podiatrist told me that homeless people never get donations of socks and that because of that, they had a lot of foot problems. It took me two years to get up the nerve to go back to the soup kitchen, but what that doctor said always stayed with me. And I thought, ‘I wonder if I can help do something about that?’ ”

Seven years later, Costello’s fear of the homeless is gone, replaced by a passion that now consumes his life outside the classroom: socks. Thousands and thousands of new pairs in every color and size imaginable, all donated to his nonprofit charity, [The Joy of Sox](#).

Since 2011, Costello, who started his project with a few dozen pairs of socks purchased at Costco a few days before Christmas, estimates that about 205,000 pairs have been handed out to homeless people nationwide, including on Valentine’s Day, after he convinced Pennsylvania to officially designate the holiday as National Socks for the Homeless Day in 2013.



**Some students in suburban Philadelphia held a sock drive.**

“People tend to be generous with donations between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but new socks are something that are needed year-round,” he tells **PEOPLE**, “so I like to remind everyone when they buy chocolates for their moms or flowers for their spouses, to also think about picking up a pair of socks for the homeless.”

Joy of Sox donations are now distributed at 63 shelters in the Philadelphia area, along with dozens of other shelters and soup kitchens for the homeless in 29 states, including Alaska.

“Socks are something that everybody needs, but they rarely get donated in the bags of ‘gently used’ clothes that come to our agency,” Rachel Falcove, executive director of the [Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network](#), tells **PEOPLE**. “When I see how eagerly Tom’s quality socks are accepted by the families we serve, I realize what an important service Tom is providing. Each time he comes in with boxes full of socks, he always makes us smile.”

Socks are the No. 1 requested item at Our Brother’s Place Men’s Homeless Shelter in Philadelphia, adds Gerald Gibbons, 27, a college student who runs a “pop-up” clinic there.



**Some socks ready to be distributed  
Courtesy Tom Costello Jr**

“The guys absolutely love them,” he says. “The importance of socks in this population really comes into play when you recognize how many gentlemen have diabetes, which

can cause numbness in the feet. Clean socks can help prevent fungal infections and blisters, which can lead to open wounds. One of the best feelings we get all week is when Tom drops off his socks at the shelter. All of the men smile and say, 'How many socks do you have today?' ”

Wherever Costello goes, he now carries a backpack filled with socks to hand out to homeless people he encounters along the way.

“I’m over my fear — I’m comfortable now talking to them,” he tells PEOPLE. “My epiphany moment came the very first time I handed out socks that one Christmas. A lady asked for a pair for a friend, then started to cry and told me, ‘Nobody has ever given me socks before.’ Then she reached out and gave me a hug — my very first hug from a homeless person. That meant a lot to me. Then to watch her walk away smiling — that’s what it’s all about.”

<http://people.com/human-interest/pennsylvania-man-helps-keep-feet-of-the-homeless-warm-and-dry-through-his-joy-of-sox/>