

Woman's Day magazine, August/September 2024 issue

MEET KAR WOO

Founder and program director for Artists Helping the Homeless

MY PERFECT DAY

- Go-karting at KI Speed
- Woo Krew face-off at Game Show Battle Rooms
- Team pizza party



Woo came to the United States from Hong Kong for college, initially landing in Iowa. "From there, I got a job in Kansas City," he says. He's been there ever since.



Art lover Woo says it was "really weird" to close his art gallery to work full-time with Artists Helping the Homeless, but he felt called to do it.


 "PEOPLE NEED HELP. I THOUGHT I SHOULD BE THERE FOR THEM."



Woo has been giving out sandwiches at this park for the past 17 years!

Kar Woo (adoringly called "Woo" by all) never expected to become an advocate for the homeless. He originally came to the United States from Hong Kong for college, working in retail to support himself. He then used his retail acumen to open his own art gallery in Kansas City, MO, simply because he had "always really liked art." A few years in, he started noticing Kansas City's homeless population. "They'd come into the gallery to ask for food or supplies, or to use the bathroom," he says. Woo always said yes—he'd experienced being without a place to live, albeit briefly, after his apartment building had burned down years earlier, and a coworker's mom had taken him in, reinforcing his belief in the importance of kindness. "I grew up reading kung fu stories, and the principle of them is to always be kind to others," he explains. One Sunday he decided to pick up some sandwiches and bring them to unhoused people in Kansas City's Park Plaza, and this became a weekly tradition. When St. Luke's hospital called a citywide meeting to discuss the issue of nonemergency patients (who were often

WOO: FULL-PAGE PORTRAIT: SHARON MARIE WRIGHT; WOO PERSONAL IMAGES: COURTESY OF SUBJECT

ARTICLE

How to watch... Download the Very Local app on your smartphone.



Woo was overjoyed to receive a \$10,000 gift card to use at Pilot Flying J gas stations. "Gas is a huge need," he says. "We spend \$50,000 a year on gas alone."

A \$10,000 GIFT CARD FROM PILOT FLYING J WILL FUEL MAJOR CHANGE!

unhoused) using emergency rooms, the hospital asked these citizens if there was anyone local they'd want to work with to solve the problem, and Woo's name kept coming up. "St. Luke's Hospital asked me to create a program to address the issue. Of course I said yes," says Woo. That was the start of Artists Helping the Homeless (AHH; ahh.org), an organization that aims to reduce the need for and the cost of caring for this population in Kansas City. The unhoused community there was right to realize Woo's potential as an ally: The program has been hugely successful, helping nearly 2,000 people

each year with things like rides to and from appointments, discharge planning for those released from hospitals or jails, and transitional and longer-term housing. "I think part of the success is because I'm foreign," says Woo. "I've always had an open mind to listen, because I didn't always know the language. When I started offering transportation, people were trapped with me, and when they talked, I listened and didn't judge. So I understand what the challenges in serving this community are and where the gaps are." AHH provides what Woo calls "full wraparound service," meaning it helps with housing,

DAS STATION HIGGS: SHARON MARIE WRIGHT (2)

INGOLDT: SHARON MARIE WRIGHT; WOO WITH VAN: COURTESY OF SUBJECT.



Woo's Yay! List

MEET
The other fairy godmother



→ Pilot's first-ever chief marketing officer, Adrienne Ingoldt, flew to Kansas City to present Kar Woo with a \$10,000 gift card for gas after hearing how important transportation services were for his organization. Woo estimated that AHH spent almost \$400,000 last year providing reliable, timely, and safe transportation, crucial for those struggling with recent incarceration and

homelessness. "Giving back is core to who I am and the reason I'm so proud to further Pilot's mission to fuel change and show people they matter," Ingoldt says. "Kar and his team at AHH embody this every day with the incredible work they do for their community. I was thrilled to provide Kar with the resources he needs, reminding him that he matters and his work makes a difference."



AHH's seven vans drove 245,791 miles while serving the community in 2023.



Happy feet for all

Socks are the item most requested by the unhoused. "When you're on the street and don't have a place to do laundry, if your socks get dirty, you throw them away," says Woo. Our friends at SockGuy donated hundreds of fun high-performance pairs and promised frequent replenishment. sockguy.com



Woo's Yay! List

Tree-mendous honor

We planted a Northern red oak in Mill Creek Park, where Woo began serving meals to the unhoused more than a decade ago. The planting of roots where his philanthropy had taken root moved him to tears.



THE KAR WOO CREW
It has been said that trust is earned, respect is given, and loyalty is demonstrated. This community's unparalleled bond is a beautiful thing to behold.



"In my program, we treat everybody as friends, as equals," says Woo. "Playing the game show together built even more camaraderie."

MY PERFECT DAY IMAGES: SHARON HARIE WRIGHT (2); TREE: GETTY IMAGES

PAPA JOHN'S PIZZA BOX: HETI HONARJALAMY/STOCK PHOTO

food, clothing, transportation, medication, advocacy, and counseling. (It has been called "the safety net for the safety net.") Woo believes that this holistic approach allows people to escape the cycle of homelessness, freeing them from worry about day-to-day necessities. "It's not about getting the first job they can find at a fast-food restaurant and surviving. That's not long-term growth. We provide support for them to have a chance at long-term growth," he says. To him, that involves things like getting a college degree and purchasing a home. "We really want them to

have their own lives to move forward in," he says. "That's success to me." Woo's unique approach to serving unhoused individuals doesn't just benefit them—he himself loves it. "I think what brings me the most joy is, it really allows me to have lots of friends," he says. "I wasn't anticipating any of this when I created this program. But I'm not getting any younger, and this provides me motivation to keep going. Whenever I have any need, every one of the people and organizations I work with will stand up and be there for me. That really touches my heart."

—Sara Gaynes Levy

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR COMMUNITY

Don't just give supplies or money—Woo's greatest lesson is that listening is the ultimate gift. "Finding out what people's needs are is really important," he says. "If we truly want to help them, we have to really provide for them." Visit ahh.org to learn more.

