

# The Capital

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published July 20, 2009

## Unlikely 'hero' could win funds for Light House shelter

### Friends ask for votes

By ELIZABETH HULETTE, Staff Writer

Joe Gill didn't seek the spotlight. It found him.

Unbeknownst to the shy Severna Park resident, his colleague, Gene Deems, entered him in Applebee's "Real Heroes" competition for his work on expanding the Light House shelter in Annapolis to serve more of the city's homeless.

Out of 8,500 applicants, Gill was picked as one of 10 finalists.

"He nominated me, and I said 'What? This isn't what I do,' " Gill said. Then he spoke with leaders at Light House, who pointed out that the extra publicity could help raise awareness about the shelter and the people it needs to help.

"They said, 'This is great. This will really shine attention on homelessness,' " Gill said. "And I said OK."

The winner will be determined by an online vote that ends Thursday. If Gill wins, he and Deems plan to donate the prizes - \$6,000 and two \$500 Applebee's gift cards - to the shelter.

Friends of Light House have started an e-mail campaign around town to get as many people as possible to vote for Gill. According to a spokeswoman for Applebee's, about 6,000 votes have been cast in the contest so far.



Paul W. Gillespie - For The Capital

The Capital Joe Gill of Severna Park was selected by Applebee's as one of 10 finalists in their national search for a 'real hero.' A lawyer for the state Department of Natural Resources by day, Gill dedicates much of his free time to the Light House homeless shelter in Annapolis. He was one of 8,500 people nominated and stands to win \$5,000 and food from Applebee's.

Gill, who is married with two daughters, works as assistant attorney general for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

He started volunteering at Light House in 2001, served as president of the board of directors for four years, and has been one of the driving forces behind building a new facility for the shelter.

Located in a small storefront space on West Street, Light House turns away about 500 homeless people each year because it lacks enough space. And with the recession, the need is growing.

But now, after years of work and much help from Gill, Light House is planning to break ground soon on a new 25,000-square-foot building on Hudson Street near the Annapolis National Guard Armory.

It will triple the shelter's capacity and provide space for extra services, like a job resource center, to help people get back on their feet, Gill said.

"The current facility is pretty small. We set up tables right next to beds," Gill said. "We really want to create a place of light and joy and hope, and that's what we want this new facility to be."

Deems said until he met Gill and talked with him about Light House, he didn't really understand the people who seek help from shelters or how they become homeless.

"They're you and me. People who are down on their luck," Deems said. "A battered wife and her children, a family whose house was burned down, military veterans, children, teenagers - people just needing a helping hand."

Harry Cole, executive director at Light House, said he hopes people vote in the contest not only for the shelter, but for Gill - even if Gill would prefer not to have all this attention.

"He didn't want to get any recognition for this project, and that's just Joe," Cole said. "He's a difference-maker, and it's for all the right reasons."

To vote for Joe Gill, visit the Web site at [applebeeshero.com](http://applebeeshero.com). Voters can cast one vote each day through Thursday.