

The Oregonian

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Hands guided by hearts

With two Web sites, Hands On Portland, the region's largest volunteer clearinghouse, connects people who want to help with groups that need it

Becky Blumer's job means she has to be prepared for a different kind of post-holiday lull -- in compassion.

Blumer, 31, is assistant director for Hands On Portland, a 7-year-old nonprofit that tries to make volunteering easy by matching volunteers to jobs across the Portland area.

The holidays are a time when people think of volunteering, Blumer said. That sentiment drops off come January.

"Interest declines," she said. "But people are still hungry. Animals still need to be taken care of. There are still trees that need to be planted all year around."

Blumer's formal volunteer work began when she was an 8-year-old Girl Scout in White Sulphur Springs, Mont., visiting with residents at a senior center.

At 22, she was a mentor to an 8-year-old girl whose mother worked the graveyard shift in Lewiston, Idaho. They met once a week for two years, reading books together, going to the park, doing art projects.

"I was able to see our relationship develop," Blumer said, "and how much that meant to me and to her."

After earning a teaching degree, Blumer worked in various jobs for AmeriCorps, including coordinating volunteers at a low-income rural school outside Bozeman, Mont., and helping lead AmeriCorps programs in Idaho.

She arrived in Portland four years ago as Hands On Portland's second employee. The group has since grown to five employees and 300 community partners, including Portland Public Schools, the Oregon Food Bank and the Union Gospel Mission.

Hands On Portland's Web sites -- www.handsonportland.org and www.volunteerhere.com -- list potential volunteer jobs and group projects, including some that let children participate.

This summer, Hands On Portland merged with VolunteerWorks to form the region's largest volunteer clearinghouse. The merged group plans to unveil a new online signup system for volunteers in April.

Blumer's conversation with The Oregonian has been edited for brevity and clarity.

What stops people from volunteering?

It doesn't fit with their schedule, or people don't know how to get involved. We try to address that through the way we run our programs. We offer a lot of projects you can do in one day, mainly on weekends and evenings. People can bring their children or their friends or go out with a group of people. The training is limited and on-site. We have 10,000 opportunities to connect people every year.

What are the biggest unmet needs?

There are needs everywhere. I haven't heard of a nonprofit in the last year that hasn't wanted financially or couldn't use more volunteers. But I'd say schools and hunger are two of the bigger things right now. And there are always seniors who need visiting or someone to go grocery shopping for them.

Aren't the volunteer efforts drops in the bucket when it comes to the need?

They make a difference. So many organizations right now are relying on volunteers to meet their mission. If you look at the Cat Adoption Team, a no-kill cat shelter in Sherwood, the work they do every day is done by volunteers. If you look at all the (downtown Portland) rescue missions, almost every night they're totally staffed by volunteers who are cooking and preparing meals. The SMART reading program wouldn't exist if it weren't for volunteers. One time, I went out and removed ivy with a kid who lived at Columbia Villa. I ran into her a year later at the store and she still remembered my name. She said, "Oh, hey, are you still volunteering?" That experience has obviously had an impact on her life.

Some of the jobs aren't directly working with poor people. What does a volunteer get out of packing food at the Oregon Food Bank?

They get the satisfaction of knowing that all the thousands of pounds and tons of food that are packed are going to people in need. It takes all kinds of people doing all sorts of jobs. And the food bank does a great job of connecting people to the impact of their work. If you go to the food bank, you're going to know how important your work is by the end of the project.

How does a parent build a sense of community service in children?

I'm not a parent, but I can tell you about my experience with my parents. As a child, I started volunteering really young, even if it was volunteering to help out our neighbors.

My mom would volunteer me to mow my neighbors' lawn when they weren't feeling well. My parents also gave a lot even though they didn't have a lot financially. So it's just that modeling for your kids. Kids have a lot to give, and they can start giving at an early age.

Changes don't happen overnight. The people you help aren't always appreciative. Do people feel disappointed by that?

One of the things about change is it's incremental. But rather than sitting back and waiting for nothing to happen, we encourage people to take small steps. If a lot of people are moving forward incrementally, we're going to cover a lot of ground eventually. We also tell people to walk in someone else's shoes. It's a hard thing to take from somebody when you don't have anything to give. What would it be like to be the person getting the food basket?

Hands On Portland sets up many projects for groups of volunteers. Why is that so popular?

More and more things are made so we don't have to talk to people; we don't go to the clerk in the bank anymore. The volunteers are connecting to the people they're serving food to, but they're also connecting to the people they're serving food with.

What good is going to come out of the recent merger?

We're doing everything both organizations were doing and more, and we're doing it for a lot less overhead. What we're really working toward is providing opportunities so everyone knows they can get involved. If you really want to get involved and go out every day, we want to have that opportunity for you. If you just want to go out once a year, we want to provide that opportunity, too. We want everyone engaged in making Portland a better place to live.