

Cabdriver finds life's drive in charity work

Dave Yandell wants to do good full time after food, bicycle giveaways

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David Yandell is a man on a mission.

A lot of missions, in fact.

Yandell is a Radio Cab driver. In 1996, he convinced his company to collect and distribute enough food — including turkeys and all the trimmings — to feed 50 families. Nine years later, the company has started a nonprofit organization to help buy the food.

The Radio Cab Foundation expects to distribute free turkey dinners to nearly 1,000 families this weekend. The foundation also will accept cash and food donations to supplement the giveaway at its headquarters, 1613 N.W. Kearney St.

“If anyone had told me the program would ever grow this large, I wouldn’t have believed it,” Yandell said.

Radio Cab Communications Director Wade Rogerson says all of the company employees get something out of the program.

“A lot of us here are just one or two paychecks away from homelessness ourselves. This is like helping people we know, the family down the street that’s run into a patch of bad luck. I know it makes my Christmas,” said Rogerson, who manages the foundation.

It is not unusual for Portlanders to help people in trouble, said Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands On Portland, a group that links volunteers with more than 300 local nonprofit organizations.

“People in Portland have a very strong sense of community. Many people show it by volunteering or by engaging in what’s called ‘neighboring,’ which can be simply mowing your neighbor’s lawn or watching the children down the street,” he said.

But the Christmas turkey drive is only one of the volunteer efforts that Yandell has launched during the past decade. In 1992, with the help of his fellow taxi drivers, he led a drive to hand out nearly 1,000 backpacks full of school supplies to students at two elementary schools in Northeast Portland. Before that, he and the drivers collected and distributed hundreds of bicycles to Portland youngsters as Christmas gifts, an effort they are repeating this year.

Over the years, Yandell has enlisted a number of important financial supporters for the projects. They include Homer Williams and Thorndike Dame, the two developers behind many of the Pearl District and South Waterfront redevelopment projects. While driving Dame to his office a few years ago, Yandell figured out who he was and asked him to support his efforts. Dame brought Yandell in to meet Williams, and the two men were so impressed they’ve since donated thousands of dollars to his projects.

“At first we were trying to figure out what to make of Dave. He’s a real one-man band, a real asset to Portland,” Williams said.

Another backer is the Meyer Memorial Trust, created by the late Fred Meyer, which contributed \$1,500 to the foundation for this year’s turkey giveaway.

Life takes turn down, then up

Yandell has a number of complex, personal reasons for wanting to help others. A high school dropout who served time in the McLaren Youth Facility outside of Salem, he did not think he would ever amount to anything.

“Everyone I grew up with went to prison,” he said.

Personal tragedy struck Yandell 22 years ago when his 8-month-old son, Jeremy, died in his arms at Doernbecher Children’s Hospital. The death turned Yandell bitter, making him hate Christmas. But he overcame the setbacks, got a job at Radio Cab and put himself through Portland State University, eventually earning a triple degree in psychology, sociology and social sciences in 1992.

Despite the degree, Yandell continued driving a cab, saying he did not believe he could successfully compete for higher paying jobs because of his background. Instead, he put his energies into helping people who were worse off than himself, beginning with the turkey giveaways.

“To me, it was always about more than just a turkey dinner. The dinner is symbolic — it’s what brings a family together around the table,” he said.

Yandell has made no money off his charitable efforts.

“I don’t even have a checking account,” said Yandell, who lives in a small room above a bar. “I have a bed and a TV, and that’s all I need.”

But now, Yandell is trying to figure out how to make a living working on such projects. Because Radio Cab has set up a foundation to continue the Christmas meal project, Yandell has begun telling friends this is the last year he will work on it.

“After the holidays, I’m going to see if there isn’t a way I can do this full time,” he said.

More volunteers put in time

Yandell is not alone in his personal commitment to help others. Although no single person or agency keeps track of all the volunteers in Portland, a recent study suggests it is probably in the tens of thousands every year.

The study was conducted by Hands On Portland and the Oregon Commission for Voluntary Action & Service, a state-sanctioned volunteer support and referral organization. In March 2005, the two groups surveyed a sample of 182 nonprofit organizations of all sizes throughout the state, including those working in the fields of the arts, education, environment and social services.

The survey, titled Oregon Volunteer Trends, found that nearly all of the organizations used volunteers, with the annual numbers ranging from as few as 20 to more than 28,000. Most of the organizations said the volunteers performed direct services in support of their programs.

More than that, 70 percent of those responding to the survey reported they have seen increases in the number of volunteers over the past five years.

Hands On Portland Executive Director Andy Nelson thinks the numbers may be even higher now, in part because of the recent wave of natural disasters that have left so many people homeless.

“It’s been a whole year of natural disasters that has heightened people’s sensitivities to the suffering of others. People want to help, even if they’re not always clear on how,” he said.

Nelson also believes that volunteering traditionally increases during the year-end holiday season. He expects his organization will make 1,400 volunteer connections in December, compared to 700 in typical months.

“December is, bar none, the most popular time of the year for volunteering,” he said.

The Radio Cab turkey program is just one small example of this happening on the local level. Other private businesses, including radio and television stations, also launch food drives during the holiday season. Established nonprofit organizations, such as the Salvation Army and the Union Gospel Mission, also expand their meal programs at this time. And an unknown number of individuals, like Yandell, take it upon themselves to reach out, often by simply helping a less fortunate family.

“We can’t expect someone else to take care of everyone in our backyard,” Yandell said.

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