



Benjamin Whiteley: Stand up and stand by me

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Recent headlines throughout Oregon have been alarming and frequent: above average unemployment, inadequate resources for education, and even hunger.

Our state undeniably trails others in many measures of social and economic health.

Still, as this year - a tough one for Oregon - ends, I am optimistic. I am optimistic in part because across the state many Oregonians, as in years past, are voluntarily doing good things to help their communities through difficult times.

As a member of The Oregon Community Foundation board of directors, I have the privilege to meet or hear about Oregonians who demonstrate their concern for their communities by making charitable gifts to various non-profit organizations and by volunteering their time for a broad range of activities. Their support of, and involvement in, education, human services, the arts and the environment directly benefit our communities, particularly youth, the elderly and the disadvantaged.

These actions normally don't make headlines. But they are worth knowing about because they remind us that as individuals with imagination, energy, and heart, we have the power to make a positive difference in our communities.

For example:

The Oregon Community Warehouse, founded in 2001 by volunteers, philanthropists, and activists, provides basic household goods to low-income families. The organization works with more than 750 caseworkers representing almost 100 agencies to identify clients, and each month distributes an estimated \$30,000 in household goods to some 190 families.

Since 1995, Hands On Portland has been recruiting and connecting young volunteers for short-term projects with over 60 nonprofit organizations. Young people ages 18-35 are accomplishing much needed work and in the process they're enjoying the experience of meaningful community service, and gaining a deeper understanding of important community issues, as well as new skills and confidence.

Modeled on a national project, Oregon Mentors helps identify and educate prospective mentors and mentorship programs, conducts appropriate background checks, and connects mentors to community-based youth groups and the estimated 90,000 young people in Oregon who need and want mentors. Begun in 2001, Oregon Mentors plans over the next five years to increase the number of mentors by 10,000 and expand to better serve the entire state.

The good work of individuals and organizations typically inspires hope and encourages others to join in so that even more good is accomplished. These actions confirm that Oregonians are committed to maintaining healthy communities.

Next year marks the 200th anniversary of when explorers assembled back east to make the uncharted journey to what is now Oregon, an effort that - in overcoming so many obstacles - helps define our heritage. Next year, are we, like those 200 years ago, ready to stand together to make the effort, individually and collectively, to overcome the challenges on our way to restoring or maintaining healthy communities?

I think so. After all, as we've so often been told, history does repeat itself.

(Benjamin Whiteley is a member of The Oregon Community Foundation Board - an organization that improves life through philanthropy and building an endowment for Oregon.)