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Want to volunteer? Make this the year

Sustainable Life: Those who give time get back the rewards of making a difference

Keywords

BY JENNIFER WILLIS

The Portland Tribune Dec 7, 2006

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Writer

For years, I'd wanted to volunteer for the holidays, to celebrate the spirit of giving and gratitude.



/ COURTESY OF FRIENDLY HOUSE
An annual holiday party at Friendly House caters to the senior crowd.

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But there were always family activities, neighborhood gatherings and business parties that conflicted. I wanted to make a difference but just kept saying, I'll do it next year.

I decided I'd waited long enough.

I started contacting charitable organizations in Portland, looking for a soup kitchen that needed help. I'd imagined myself serving mashed potatoes and yams at a local shelter but was surprised to find a wide array of volunteer opportunities, from holiday parties at senior centers to delivering meal boxes.

What I hadn't counted on is that most volunteer openings fill up long before the holidays arrive. It warmed my heart to know so many people wanted to make a difference – but it also frustrated me to no end. I wanted to volunteer.

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I soon found a perfect fit.



The Monday before Thanksgiving, I showed up at the downtown office of the Jewish Family & Child Service to volunteer as a driver for their Thanksgiving basket program.



“Many people think that we only serve Jewish people, but we serve the entire Portland community,” says Kelly Bordman, administrative program specialist and volunteer coordinator for the nonsectarian agency, whose clients include children, families, older adults, people with disabilities, and those seeking mental health and other assistance.





Fourteen volunteers helped with this year’s Thanksgiving baskets – the largest turnout yet for the event. Forty-five households in metro Portland received Thanksgiving food boxes. Community donations made the program possible, with all food items ordered from Safeway.




Volunteers arrived early to fill the boxes with turkeys, stuffing mix, cranberry sauce, green beans, potatoes, chicken broth, rolls, mandarin oranges, mixed nuts, butter, sparkling cider and pumpkin pie. Everything a family needed for a hearty holiday meal.




Those boxes were heavy.



The staff loaded up my car and gave me names, addresses and driving directions. I headed out into traffic and started delivering.



Smiles make a difference

At my first stop, the entire family came out to thank me for helping to make their holiday complete. I felt uncomfortable receiving the praise. I knew little about the group and couldn’t even speak intelligently about the organization. But their smiles and gratitude made me feel that my little contribution made a difference.




Later on my route, I met a woman who appeared to be undergoing chemotherapy. She invited me inside and told me that one of her cats recently had died. Then she pointed down to the cat brushing up against my leg. She said he had appeared at her window just days before the other cat died. We agreed he was an angel sent to help her through the loss.




My last stop involved a computerized intercom at a secure apartment building. Two students stopped to help me navigate the display. They didn’t know what I was delivering, but they hung around to hold the door open as I wobbled under the weight of the Thanksgiving box, and made sure I found my way down the hall to the elevator.

Returning to my car after the last delivery was a letdown. I wanted to do more.

The good news is that the holidays are far from over. There are many volunteer opportunities for people of all ages – and all abilities – who want to make a difference.

The meaning of the season

Portland writer Kerri Buckley and her children adopted a mentally disabled man for Christmas. Buckley’s son, Alex, picked out some clothes for him, and her daughter, Aleah, picked out a card and food. Buckley rounded out the gifts with a coffeemaker and dishes for his new apartment, and friends chipped in with cookies, towels and soap.

“I think it taught my children that Christmas is not just about getting presents. It’s also about thinking about others, even others we don’t know,” Buckley says. “They also learned that kindness requires some thought, to

consider the needs of someone who is alone, without family or in need of the very basics.”

Whether you’re celebrating Christmas, Yule, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or the winter solstice, why not get involved as a holiday volunteer?

You can be a delivery driver for a nonprofit, or serve a holiday meal at a shelter – if you can find a spot open. You can wrap presents at fundraising tables in the mall, or join with co-workers to adopt a family for the holidays.

You can help with a food or toy drive, or volunteer as an usher at a Christmas play. You can decorate a hospital or senior center for the holidays, or help sort coats that have been donated to help keep people warm. You can even assist as a translator for nonprofits who serve non-English-speaking clients.

I guarantee you’ll get back more than you give.

To find out how you can help this holiday season, contact the organizations below, or get in touch with your local community center or house of worship.

- Jewish Family & Child Service

1130 S.W. Morrison St., Suite 316, 503-226-7079, ext.17

www.jfcs-portland.org,

kelly@jfcs-portland.org

Runs the Mitzvah Menorah/Holiday Gift Project in partnership with the Portland Jewish Academy, to bring Hanukkah, Christmas and holiday gifts to children, families and seniors in need.

- Portland Rescue Mission

111 W. Burnside St., 503-906-7697, portlandrescuemission.org,

volunteer@pdxmission.org

Offers Christmas Eve dinner for the homeless, serving a prime rib dinner to approximately 400 people, with a live performance by the Resurrection Choir.

- Hands On Greater Portland

2145 N.W. Overton St., 503-413-7787, handsonportland.org,

info@handsonportland.org

Maintains an online list of holiday and other opportunities to help volunteers make a meaningful difference in metro Portland.

- Transition Projects

475 N.W. Glisan St.,

503-823-4926, ext. 4,

www.tprojects.org,

info@tprojects.org

Organizes the annual Coat and Blanket Drive (October through December) to help keep Portland’s homeless population warm during the winter months.

- Friendly House

2617 N.W. Savier St., 503-228-4391

www.friendlyhouseinc.org

Since 1930, Friendly House has offered support to local residents in need, including children and the elderly. Volunteers help out at a variety of programs, including the annual senior holiday party.

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