

## The blessings of giving -- Gallatin Valley volunteers' tell their tales

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By JODI HAUSEN Chronicle Staff Writer |

A wise guy once said he considered volunteering, but it didn't pay enough.

There are a few things, however, that wise guy may not have considered.

Although direct financial gain from volunteering may be minimal at best, there are payoffs that go well beyond dollars, volunteers say. Making social connections, business networking and learning new skills are just a few of the benefits.

But giving to others may have positive physical and psychological health effects, too, researchers say.

A Harvard Medical School study has found beneficial neurological chemicals were produced in people helping others, associate professor of psychiatry Dr. Helen Riess recently told the Boston Globe.

And altruism's psychological effect may also be useful in treating stress and anxiety associated with some mental illnesses, Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at University of California-Berkley, also told the Globe.

Donna West, a 61-year-old retired organ-transplant coordinator, can speak to the benefits of volunteering. She donates several days of her own time each week to the Gallatin Valley Food Bank and at the Help Center -- a 24-hour crisis hotline in Bozeman that primarily helps people dealing with mental-health or sexual-assault issues.

Speaking with people so distraught they are considering ending their lives can be challenging, but also gratifying, she said.

"Hopefully we get to help somebody and they get to live another day," she said. "I'm happy I can help those people. It's fulfilling."

The benefits flow in the other direction, too. Nonprofit organization leaders say that without volunteer workers, they'd be hurting.

"We couldn't run this animal shelter without our volunteers," said Kathryn Hohmann, development director of the Heart of the Valley's Animal Shelter.

The Great Recession has only served to underscore the value of volunteering. Economic realities have forced many people who typically donate to nonprofit organizations to instead become recipients of those organizations' services. At the same time, some of those organizations need help more than ever before, and volunteering is a way for anyone to give to a cause or an organization without making a cash donation.

Volunteers are the very heart and soul of the community," Greater Gallatin United Way President Carol Townsend said Friday.

"We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

-- Sir Winston Churchill

Churchill's quote graces a poster Townsend has had for 25 years and now hangs on a United Way office wall. It is the philosophy Townsend lives by and encapsulates the values with which she reared her sons, she said.

Townsend, 60 and a native Montanan, said she began volunteering here when she moved back with her children after a 23-year absence. She served on several boards -- youth soccer and Bozeman Children's Choir -- and became her company's representative to the United Way.

"I've always been a community volunteer," she said. "I wanted to participate and was looking for ways to give to the community, but also ways find connections and friends.

"I started out looking for what (volunteering) could give to me more than what I could give to the community," she said.

And though she found volunteer work gratifying, she didn't realize how valuable it was until she applied for her current position.

"After volunteering for 11 years, when the United Way position became available, my volunteer experience was a key factor in my being considered for the job," she said. "I ended up with this job because I volunteered."

"If you knew what I know about the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing it in some way."

-- Buddha

When 10-year-old Sam Rogers "got in trouble" last summer, his parents decided he needed a lesson in gratitude. In penance for his misdeed, Sam spent some time volunteering at the Gallatin Valley Food Bank.

"My parents wanted me to do something for the community," he said. "But now it's not a punishment anymore."

Sam completed his pseudo-sentence several months ago, but he continues to help out at the food bank about 90 minutes each week.

"I do a lot of things here," the spritely, freckled Longfellow School fifth-grader said as he showed a Chronicle reporter and photographer around the food bank last week.

Sam helps unload food from a large truck that collects donated items from area grocery stores. He sorts and marks the donated food so it can't be returned for cash and looks for damaged cans and packages.

"It's organized shelf by shelf by shelf so it's not a big mess," he said, indicating the stores of cans and packaged pasta. "If it's dented or opened it has to be thrown away."

When Sam did an oral report about the food bank for all the Longfellow fifth-graders, he also organized a food drive. He brought in a basket and challenged his classmates to fill it within a week.

"They didn't fill it, they overfilled it," he said, grinning broadly.

The students collected 84 pounds of food and Sam's efforts inspired some of his classmates to join him as a volunteer at the food bank.

"It was great," he said. "It made me feel that my class respected the community."

Food bank executive director, Lori Christenson said it's great having Sam and his friends as volunteers, although she cautioned, that children must be accompanied by an adult to work there.

Sam's parents wanted him to recognize how fortunate he was, his mother, Kathy Rogers said.

"I wanted him to be grateful for what he had," she said.

Did it work?

"Somewhat, yes," Sam said. "I learned that I am glad that my family can afford food and I'm glad to know that this place is here for people who can't."

"In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years"

-- Abraham Lincoln

West, who volunteers several days a week at the food bank, calls Sam her "mini-me." But she has also answered phone calls at the Help Center one day a week for the past 12 years.

"In my mind, I go to work every day, even though I'm a volunteer," she said. "I've been this way my entire life. I try to help as many people as I can. And I get to work with people who really need help."

She has everything she needs to be happy and believes she should share her good fortune by volunteering.

"I believe when people get older, everybody should give back," West said. "Instead of just preaching it, I do it."

"All of us have been given something along the road. I've had a good life and I just feel when you've had a good life, you give it back. So that's what I do. I'm giving it all back."

West says her work makes her appreciate the good life she's had.

"I don't have a complaint," West said. "Absolutely not."

"We call them dumb animals, and so they are, for they cannot tell us how they feel, but they do not suffer less because they have no words."

-- Anna Sewell, author of "Black Beauty"

Carissa Stein says she volunteers at Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter around two hours each week -- at least that's what she's scheduled for. But the full-time Montana State University animal science major admits that once she's there, she has a hard time leaving.

Stein's title at the shelter is "cat cuddler." But her mission, she said, is to socialize the shyer felines to make them more attractive to potential adoptive families.

"You want to see them get a good home," she said. "That's the main thing for me."

"And it's addictive, you know," she added, as she stroked a tabby's soft fur. "I can't even express how much joy I get getting to know these animals, especially when they get adopted."

Like Townsend, Stein started volunteering when she first moved to Bozeman about a year ago, "because it's a great way to get to know your community," she said.

Stein had been based in North Carolina, but deployed overseas several times during her nine years in the U.S. Air Force. Because of her multiple deployments, the animal lover couldn't have a pet.

"It's really hard not to get a pet when you love them, but you don't want to put them through deployments," she said.

So she volunteered at an animal shelter there "to get my fix," she said.

And though she loves all the cats at the shelter, she's not bringing any of them home. She already has a cat, she said, that probably wouldn't appreciate the competition.

It's hard sometimes, she said.

"But then I remember that mine's a diva and she wouldn't be happy."

"There are painters who transform the sun to a yellow spot. But there are others who, with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into the sun."

-- Pablo Picasso

Allie Buck, 25, is an artist and a mother who has been volunteering at the Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture for about four years.

As a docent she takes children on gallery tours. She also teaches children's art classes and helps out in the center's ceramic studio, she said as she worked on a painting in her studio in Bozeman's northeast neighborhood.

Buck said though she isn't paid in greenbacks for her work at the Emerson, she profits in myriad other ways from it.

For one, the kids and adults she instructs inspire her.

"They keep me in shape and sharp," she said. "It keeps me young and it is so much fun. It's my escape."

She has also benefitted from the people she has met there.

For example, one artist gave her a used kiln, another a potting wheel. She also learned from someone else about a program that netted her a teaching residency at Longfellow Elementary School. And her work now hangs in the Tart gallery -- a result of getting to know people.

"That's the other thing about volunteering," she said. "You make connections."

But Buck said she really just wants to promote art and the creative process.

"I guess I just want to give back somehow," she said. "I wish I could give millions to the Emerson Center, but I can give my time and my skills."

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

-- Margaret Mead

Serving as president of a board of directors is likely one of the least glamorous and most time-consuming of volunteer positions but it's no less gratifying, said Barb Weas, a 53-year-old mother of four.

Weas served as the president of the board of Eagle Mount, which provides recreational opportunities for people with disabilities.

Weas, who grew up showing horses, first joined the ranks of Eagle Mount volunteers as a "sidewalker" for the equine program, an experience that made her realize how fortunate she is.

"You realize how precious your life and your health is," she said. "But we're all in different places and you want to come alongside and help celebrate their abilities."

One day a friend at Eagle Mount asked her to join the board, a role she'd never taken on before. She did it, but at first she was a bit perplexed.

"When you first join a board, you have to figure out where your skill set can add value," she said.

She joined the committee that planned the Winter Ball, now called the Crystal Ball, one of the organization's two annual fundraising events. Still, she asked herself how she was helping. Her work didn't feel as tangible as it had been when she was a sidewalker.

"This is so different from what I'm used to," she said. "A lot of time you can't see how you are adding value. You don't see it right away."

But as she hesitantly took on the role of board leader, she spent many hours in the search for a new executive director, in addition to other tasks. Although she didn't go daily to the Goldenstein Lane headquarters, she spent at least part of most days working for the organization.

Soon she realized that the "sum parts of an organization are greater than the whole," she said.

"Collectively you're so much more than you are as an individual," she added. "And it's so awesome to be part of something bigger than yourself."

"Remember that there is no happiness in having or in getting, but only in giving. Reach out. Share. Smile. Hug. Happiness is a perfume you cannot pour on others without getting a few drops on yourself."

-- Og Mandino

It is impossible to gauge exactly how many nonprofit organizations exist in the Gallatin Valley region, Townsend said. No one really tracks it, although the United Way has tried.

In 2007, the organization sent out 2,000 surveys in an effort to collect some of that data. Nearly 700 surveys were returned, detailing a wide demographic in volunteers' ages and income levels. Of those responding, 80 percent said they volunteered through work, schools or religious organizations.

About 18 months ago, Greater Gallatin United Way set up a volunteer database where potential volunteers can list their skills and interests and organizations can post their needs -- a sort of job service for volunteers ([volunteer.truist.com/gguw/volunteer](http://volunteer.truist.com/gguw/volunteer)).

Currently, 160 organizations and 500 volunteers are registered on the site, Townsend said.

And the Gallatin Valley region is rich with generous people who contribute money, resources and speak up for those in need, Townsend said.

"The level of volunteerism in a community is an indicator of how well a community thrives," she said. "And this community wants to step up."

Jodi Hausen can be reached at [jhausen@dailychronicle.com](mailto:jhausen@dailychronicle.com) or 582-2630. Read her blog at [jhausen.wordpress.com](http://jhausen.wordpress.com) or follow her on Twitter [@bozemancrime](https://twitter.com/bozemancrime).

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