

Volunteering: One Vernonian's Perspective

By Catherine M. Helmer

I have volunteered most of my life. As a teenager, I taught Sunday school and helped my mom with whatever volunteer project she was involved in--and she was involved in a lot of them. Throughout my daughter's K-12 years, I worked full-time, but always signed up to be a school volunteer to help out in some way. Whether it was bagging popcorn for Friday Popcorn Sales, teaching her classmates a craft project, helping to grade papers, tutoring, working on the school's website or being a Local School Committee member, I always had an interest in wanting to help out with the "big picture".

After my daughter entered high school, I still volunteered, but it was harder to juggle full-time work and volunteering at the high school level, then there was an ad in the school's online newsletter needing someone to launder the Lost and Found items and deliver them to the Clothes Closet (Beaverton School District). So, I signed up to do that. It was the last thing I thought a volunteer would be needed for, but it was actually kind of fun.

After my husband and I moved to Vernonia in June of 2006 and we attended the 4th of July parade and Jamboree, I thought, how fun would that be to volunteer and help be a part of these festivities. However, I didn't do anything with my thoughts because I was busy working full-time, planning our August 2007 wedding and getting settled into our home.

After the 2007 Flood, I reveled at all of the volunteers that came out to help our little town. It was amazing to me. I thought, wow, I want to be a part of that. So, finally, last summer, after my daughter had graduated from high school, our house was all done (well, pretty much all done), I asked my neighbor (Randy Parrow) how to get involved in our town. I had called different organizations over the years and hadn't gotten calls back and was a little frustrated. He was surprised that I hadn't received return calls and said to keep trying. He also suggested applying to a committee, when there's an opening.

I looked through the City of Vernonia's website for committees and saw that the Parks Committee had some openings. I thought that since we live right next to Anderson Park, it might be nice to get more involved in the parks. I was told that the committee was in need of a secretary as the current secretary was a City-intern who was at the end of his internship.

I quickly turned down the offer as I have been working in the secretarial field for 28 years and was kind of tired of taking notes and was really looking forward to a more involved position. Anyway, the intern, Seth, sent me a fabulous email with information about his experience, what he's learned, etcetera. After reading that email, I reconsidered my previous decision and so I became the secretary to the Parks Committee.

I have been with the Committee officially since August, 2009, and have enjoyed each meeting and am mastering taking minutes on my laptop, rather than my old-fashioned style of handwriting my 6+ pages of notes.

Another volunteer opportunity came to me when I ran into Sandy Welch at the Holiday Bazaar. I had a table there and she was interested in purchasing something that I had made. We got to talking and I found out who she was and what she did in town. We live near Vernonia Cares and she told me they needed volunteers to help pack Holiday boxes. I was so excited. Many years ago, I had been a recipient of a holiday box and was thrilled to be able to "pay it forward," albeit in a different city. I recruited my wonderful husband and my nephew, who was staying with us for Winter Break. We had the greatest time. I was one of the "box stuffers" and my husband and nephew were "box stackers" (there were many others volunteering with us). I think we were there for 4 hours and time flew. After the last box was stacked, we were provided with a pizza lunch. It was so great to be able to help out.

My next volunteer opportunity came about when I received an email from Scott Laird with Vernonia's Voice. Vernonia's Voice was hosting a Candidate's Forum for the Position 2 - County Commission seat. Scott was looking for one more panelist to ask questions at the Forum. I immediately said yes. Just a couple of hours commitment at night and I'd get to hear first-hand what these candidates were all about. In my previous job at the Beaverton School District, I assisted in the behind-the-scenes activities of preparing events like this, but had never been a panelist. I had a great time. The turnout was disappointing, but understandable. I remember when I'd see ads for these events and either have other plans, or not a real interest in attending. However, when I have attended these events, I always have a good time and am glad I went.

My next volunteer opportunity came after I emailed Donna Webb about Vernonia Pride to learn more about their activities and how to get involved. I was concerned that since I work during the day and their meetings are held during the day, I couldn't become involved/become a member. Donna assured me that they were always in need of volunteers and she'd have the meeting minutes emailed to me. I told her my husband and I were interested in volunteering for Make Vernonia Shine Day.

Not too long after that, DeDe Webb was knocking on our door. We were assigned to help with lunch for the volunteers. My husband was the official hot dog griller and I was one of the food servers. It was another fabulous experience and such a great turn-out. It was another 4-hour volunteer activity and we got a hot dog lunch--see the theme here, sometimes when you volunteer, they feed you! My husband and I had a wonderful time and told DeDe that if they'd have us, we'd love to become members of Vernonia Pride.

Shortly after that, DeDe Webb jokingly told me (at a Parks Committee Meeting) to be careful about letting people know I was interested in volunteering, because once my name was out there, they'd come calling. I told her I welcomed the calls. My hubby and I really wanted to become more involved in Vernonia and would be willing to help out whenever we could.

And lo and behold, DeDe had another opportunity. It was to plant flowers (that Vernonia Pride purchased) at the entrance of Anderson Park. DeDe and her husband delivered the flat of flowers to our home and we planted them. That was yet another fun, less than 2 hour volunteer project that we thoroughly enjoyed.

But wait, there's more... I got a call from DeDe not too long ago asking if I would be able to water the downtown-area trash can planters. I quickly said yes and also volunteered my wonderful hubby as well.

We are looking forward to our next volunteer opportunities and I wholeheartedly encourage any of you who have any free time, to find a way to get involved in our little town. I'm sure you'll find your volunteer experience very, very fulfilling.

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