

MONEY MATTERS

Instructors at Financial Beginnings Oregon share tips on building credit, packing away retirement savings and staying on budget this holiday season

PAGES 4-5 & 7



BY EMILY GREEN, SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

ISTOCK / MARCHMEENA29

When the Oregon Legislature removed personal finance from high school diploma requirements and lumped it in with social sciences, they inadvertently created a gap in public education.

That was nearly 32 years ago, and now Oregon ranks 28th in financial knowledge and education, according to WalletHub's 2018 survey. Last year, Champlain College gave Oregon a C grade in high school financial literacy, and while those scores aren't the worst, the competition isn't stiff. Just five states received an A grade, and a 2016 Financial Industry Regulatory Authority Inc., or FINRA, study based on a survey of more than 27,000 people found two-thirds of Americans can't pass a basic financial literacy test. Oregonians scored lower than the national average.

This overall lack of money-management prowess became apparent to Melody Bell when she was working in the insurance and credit industries. This prompted her to found Portland-based nonprofit Financial Beginnings in 2005. With a master's in finance and a Ph.D. in educational leadership and administration, Bell was able to craft a well-rounded financial education curriculum for high-schoolers, and volunteers with her nonprofit began to deliver much-needed financial instruction to Oregon classrooms.

Seven years later, Bell worked with the Legislature to reintroduce financial literacy standards to Oregon's high schools. However, the state does not provide teachers with curriculum to teach their students, and there is nothing in standardized testing that tests for those standards, said Tom Moosbrugger, development director at the

nonprofit's new iteration, Financial Beginnings Oregon. The Oregon office has become one of two affiliates of Financial Beginnings USA, which Bell now heads up in an effort to take her financial literacy programming nationwide.

Today, Financial Beginnings Oregon has an expanded mission, bringing free financial literacy training to elementary, middle and high schools, as well as to adults, with a focus on teaching low-income Oregonians. It brings classes to women in prison, people experiencing homelessness, and refugee and immigrant populations, as well as to any other community that requests a lesson about the dos and don'ts of money management.

Classes are taught by volunteer instructors, many of whom are financial institution professionals. During its most recent fiscal year, Financial Beginnings Oregon had 268 active volunteers who reached more than 31,000 students in 18 counties.

It's the only organization in the state focused on teaching young people financial basics.

"But we're not in every elementary school in the state," Moosbrugger said. "There's a lot more work to be done."

For Kate Benedict, Financial Beginnings Oregon's executive director, financial literacy is also a public health issue.

"Financial health is one of the biggest social determinates of health, but we don't talk about it the same way we talk about other public health metrics," she said.

Street Roots recently sat down with Benedict, Moosbrugger and four volunteer instructors at the Financial Beginnings Oregon office in downtown Portland. We asked them how low-income Oregonians can stretch their dollars further, build better credit and budget for the future. They shared a wealth of advice, from tips and financial basics to their favorite podcasts, apps and books. Here's what they had to say:



Kate Benedict



Tom Moosbrugger

Avoid overspending around the holidays

Instructors at Financial Beginnings Oregon recommend setting a strict budget for holiday spending, and sticking to it.

One way to do this is to put the cash amount you can afford to spend on gifts this year in an envelope. This is called the "envelope method," developed by investor-author Dave Ramsey.

"Once it runs out, it runs out," Kevin Moran said.

Kevin also recommended careful consideration when buying big-ticket items, such as electronics. The TV or smartphone that's on sale during Black Friday might not be the great buy you think it is. They might be last year's model, and stores are likely clearing them out to make room for new models that will hit the shelves in early 2019.

"I think that we've come to a time where we've really forgot what the holidays are all about," Mary Vasquez said. "It's so nice to do stuff, to make something, to make cards, to make scarves, and it's something you can do as a family. And it's fun."

Kevin agreed. He usually makes tamales for his friends and family, along with handmade gifts.

LaShanda Friedrich limits her gift-buying to close family and her godchild.

"Tell people straight up, don't buy me anything because I'm not going to buy you anything," she said.

Kate Benedict suggested shopping at thrift stores, or investing in a child's 529 college savings plan. Just \$20 each year can grow to more than \$1,000 for their education once they're grown, she said. Visit www.oregon529network.com/about to learn more.

And to make next year's holiday budgeting even easier, buy gifts when they're on sale in January.