

Kelley: 'It's very therapeutic. I surprise myself every time I come out here'

Continued from Page A4

"I think that after what I've experienced I would have every excuse to wallow in self-pity, but I told myself from the get-go that the sun rises and sets without me each day," Kelley said. "So it's up to me to make the most of it. What good would it do me or anybody else if I choose to wallow with that?"

An unlikely friendship

While Kelley relearned how to function, Gabe Smith, the managing partner of Bahama Boards Cannon Beach, experienced a life-changing transformation of his own.

The volunteer firefighter worked at the surf shop in 2019 when it teamed up with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program's beach wheelchair accessibility initiative.

People interested in renting one of the beach adaptive, fat tire wheelchairs would call the shop, and Smith would help transfer them into the chair and push it through the sand.

"For two years I was listening to people say, 'This is the last time I'm going to have my grandfather or dad on the beach,'" Smith said. "I was helping this 95-year-old guy one day. Later on, while working with the fire department, I went on a call for a guy who passed away. It was the same guy I had taken out on the beach. His family wasn't kidding, this was his last time seeing it."

After helping countless families, Smith felt an unstoppable pull to increase



Kelley is pushed in a beach wheelchair out to the water.

Gary Peterson Photography

access to the beach.

"It's affected me enough to understand how it affects everyone around them," Smith said. "I've been motivated personally. I don't have a physical problem. I've got nothing to complain about in life so I can't compare the difficulty of what people have to go through."

When Bahama Boards obtained a surfboard specially crafted for people with mobility issues, he recruited as many people as possible to take free adaptive surf lessons. When he came across Kelley's story on social media, he reached out.

"He just really sold me on this idea that we could make a positive impact in the disabled community and the community of Oregon as a whole," Kelley said.

She agreed to give surfing a try, launching a friendship

that's created a ripple effect through the Bahama Boards adaptive surfing program.

A new purpose

An adaptive surfboard is wider than a typical board, adding stability and making it possible for surfers like Kelley to ride waves while on their stomachs. From that position, the surfer can paddle through the water to catch a wave.

"It's very therapeutic," said Kelley, who started surfing in May. "I surprise myself every time I come out here. It was really challenging in the beginning, but each time I come out here it becomes more natural to me."

A team of volunteers makes Kelley's training and the adaptive surf lessons possible. They'll hoist Kelley onto the board, carry her out into the water and spread out

so they're able to intercept if there's a problem.

Kelley is now training to make it to the Paralympics. Earlier this month, she received a sponsorship that will award her with new adaptive surfing equipment.

"I wasn't an athlete before. I grew up riding dirt bikes and skateboarding and stuff but never considered myself an athlete," she said. "I never in a million years would have seen myself even playing a sport at all. Surfing, especially not. It's been one of the most amazing, exciting journeys in my life."

The accessibility challenges

While the Bahama Board's adaptive surfing program has grown to six students, the team involved in making it happen has realized just how little access there is



Nikki Davidson/The Astorian

Gabe Smith carries Kelley to the water's edge.

to the beach for people living with mobility issues.

There are no wheelchair ramps that lead directly to the water on North Coast beaches. When Kelley comes to Indian Beach for a surfing session, a team of five people takes turns carrying her wheelchair down the steep and primitive path to the water.

"It's labor-intensive, all of these people have to work," Kelley said. "I have to get carried or I have to get pushed super far in these beach chairs that are provided by Cannon Beach. If we had a power chair, or an Action Trackchair, it would go a long way."

"This is definitely not just about surfing, it's about beach access," Smith added.

According to the Oregon Office on Disability and Health, 12% of the state's population has a mobility disability.

A survey conducted by the office reported that while 79% of adults in the state engage in some type of exercise or physical activity out-

side of work, only 65% of disabled adults reported they had exercised or engaged in physical activity in the past month.

Smith and Kelley believe there is much more local and state governments can do to give people living with a mobility disability options. While they train for the Paralympics together, the pair is working to spread awareness about the obstacles that exist.

At this time, Manzanita, Cannon Beach and Seaside have rentable beach wheelchairs. The pair hopes to get more adaptive equipment like an Action Trackchair and tools for other recreational activities on the coast. They hope one day a ramp will be built that would allow people living with a disability to get to the water on their own.

"These are not inventions we are trying to make up. These currently exist in other places," Smith said. "They don't have them here. We have some really ideal places we could get them."

Labor: There are nearly 200 open health care positions in the region

Continued from Page A1

"I think anybody who's been in either the service industry, or the 'helping other people out' industry faced enormous, enormous pressures over the past year and a half," said Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health and substance abuse treatment provider. "And I think we're seeing the cumulative effect of that."

Health care leaders say limited housing and staff burnout from the coronavirus pandemic have heightened a staffing challenge decades in the making.

Combined, there are nearly 200 open health care positions in the region as of this week.

Over half of the positions are in nursing and nursing support, with the rest being physicians, administration, custodial staff and other roles.

'A statewide phenomena'

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has 11 jobs posted.

"One that is specific to my industry, and this is probably true to other industries too, but the rate of pay has really not kept up with cost of living," Baker said. "So the issue around not having enough staff is a statewide phenomena."

Baker said she used feedback from her employees to implement the four-day work week, hoping to promote work-life balance in the personally taxing work of caregiving. Employees work nine-hour days.

"We have a lot of really compassionate people who work here, and it's hard to absorb that suffering and not take it home with you," she said.

Several health care providers said the lack of affordable housing options narrows the applicant pool. They said people have turned down jobs after searching for a place to live and coming up with nothing reasonable.

"We are definitely seeing staffing shortages," said Nancee Long, the director of communications for Columbia Memorial Hospital. "A lot of it is related to the inability to find housing locally — that has been

an issue. But I think a lot of it is also due to the fact that nationwide, people are potentially leaving medicine, due to COVID issues and burnout issues. This is a difficult position. It's a difficult job."

Judy Geiger, the vice president of patient care services at Columbia Memorial, said at a news conference this month with local health care leaders that the Astoria hospital is working on recruitment plans. As of this week, they have 119 jobs posted on their website.

"We are, just like the rest of the country, seeing a larger vacancy rate in health care jobs that is higher than we've seen in the past many years," Geiger said. "People are reevaluating their lives, I believe because of the pandemic, and choosing to leave health care settings in larger numbers than they normally would."

Over 90% of nurses at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital, the state's largest, reported mental exhaustion, according to data provided by the Oregon Nurses Association this month. Sixty percent said they are considering leaving the profession.

The state's vaccination mandate for health care workers did not significantly contribute to the staff shortage at Columbia Memorial, Long said. Out of over 700 employees, Columbia Memorial lost nine who either refused to be vaccinated or had their exemption requests denied.

Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, which has locations in Astoria and Clatskanie, said it only lost one worker to the state mandate.

Tina Foss, the vice president of operations for the region, said their six job postings are unrelated to the pandemic, and their team has expanded since last year. In the past four months, she said they have had eight staff leave and 10 join.

"We have experienced a small number of turnover earlier in the year at the height of COVID, but for us that has settled down," Foss said.

She said they have added internal support for staff, such as meals and employee recognition, and that the supportive community in Asto-

ria has had a positive impact on retention.

Fresenius Kidney Care's Astoria location has seven jobs posted.

In a written statement, Casey Stowell, the regional vice president of Fresenius Medical Care, the parent company, said, "We are offering competitive salary and benefits with the opportunity to make an impact in the lives of our patients living with kidney failure."

Local health care leaders agree the labor shortage was the result of yearslong issues coming to a head.

"Nationally, there's been struggles to hire into the health care field — and it was even before the pandemic hit — and then once the pandemic hit it really exacerbated that situation," Jason Plamondon, the chief nursing officer at Providence Seaside Hospital, said at a news conference this month.

He said the hospital is trying to be creative about hiring bonuses and other incentives. Their website lists a nursing position in maternity care with an \$8,000 signing bonus.

"There's all sorts of opportunities, so I think (it's about) just trying to sell ourselves really as an ideal place to come and work, and so far we've been doing OK," Plamondon said.

Providence Seaside has over 450 employees and had 50 jobs posted as of last week.

Margo Lalich, the county's interim public health director, said that recruitment has been an issue for the past few decades, originating in nursing schools.

"Part of the reason there was a nursing shortage, and it has sustained itself, is because we have a nursing faculty shortage across the country. There are so many vacancies," Lalich said at the news conference. "And so there just isn't the faculty to educate the students and then there aren't the clinical spots."

'A better balance'

The Oregon Nurses Association recommends higher salaries for nursing faculty and the creation of more scholarships and loan forgiveness for nursing students, especially students of color, bilingual students and people from rural areas

where the need is greater.

Despite the pandemic inspiring more people to apply for nursing school, retaining new graduates will still be a challenge, said Kevin Mealy, the communications director for the union.

"For older nurses, there used to be a better balance between the amount of patients you would send home healthy, and the amount of patients who wouldn't leave the hospital, but that ledger has grown very unbalanced so there's a lot more complicated challenging patients who you may not be able to help," Mealy said. "And I think that causes an enormous weight for people, espe-

cially who joined the profession in order to help treat people and care for them and help them get better."

Eighty-five percent of nurses at OHSU said they are unable to use their vacation time or take a mental health day, according to union data. On top of shifts over 12 hours long, Mealy said, the conditions are unsustainable.

"Because we've been in this almost two-year cycle, there has been no letdown," Mealy said. "So we're asking people to run at sprint speed for a marathon. And that isn't possible."

In Clatsop County, the health care labor shortage is in part a result of national issues years in the making

that the pandemic intensified. With openings in every local facility, competition is steep.

For those working, Mealy said competitive wages and benefits packages matter, in addition to supporting the mental health needs of staff by expanding services. Those are the kinds of work environments applicants look to find, too.

"Employers are eager to put up the 'heroes work here' signs, and nurses have answered the call," Mealy said. "But there does need to be a point where we acknowledge that this can't be a permanent state. We can't live in this 'Groundhog Day' of going over and above, every day."

Thank your favorite first responders!

The Astorian will publish a National First Responders Day Salute section on October 28, 2021 that includes your submitted photos and nominations for local first responders. Submit your photo and information online today! Deadline for submissions Friday, October 22 at noon.

<https://eo-media-group.secondstreetapp.com/First-Responders-Day-Salute>

One first responder in each category will be randomly drawn to win a free dinner.

- Firefighters
- Law Enforcement
- Nurses & Medical Personnel
- EMTs/Paramedics
- Emergency dispatchers
- Volunteers

the Astorian



NATIONAL FIRST RESPONDERS DAY
October 28, 2021

dailyastorian.com