

Basket case

Co-op that distributes fruit and vegetables growing in Grand Ronde

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Community member Kathleen Gehrke is a local volunteer for Arizona-based Bountiful Baskets Food Co-op.

She organizes baskets of fruit and vegetables that are available each Saturday for pickup at the basketball court in Chxi Musam Illihi, the Grand Ronde Tribal mixed-income family housing development.

"Each week," according to the Bountiful Baskets Web site, www.bountifulbaskets.org, "different items will be in the Bountiful Basket! We base the basket contents on what is in season, high quality, good value and local. We generally have six fruit items and six vegetable items. We focus on what would be well-received in our homes, and the extensive surveys we've done with participants over the past five years, to know what families eat."

Gehrke calls the deliveries, "a surprise every week."

The baskets cost \$15 each, \$25 for organic produce, plus a credit/

debit card processing fee of \$1.50. The co-op says that a comparable basket of produce would cost \$50 at a grocery store.

Strictly speaking, Gehrke said, one does not "buy" produce from a co-op, but contributes to the co-op that in return uses the money contributed to buy produce that is then divvied up.

An online contribution to the co-op on Monday will trigger a basket of produce being available for pickup at 1 p.m. Saturday.

More volunteers come to help Gehrke unload the bounty from the delivery truck starting at noon each Saturday, with purchasers coming an hour later.

With the encouragement of Elder and former Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg, who is a member of the co-op, Gehrke sang the co-op's praises to Tribal Council on Thursday, Feb. 14.

In a discussion with her father, Elder Leon "Chip" Tom, Tribal Council member Kathleen Tom learned that some of her father's generation

grew gardens for produce each year. "But many went without," she said, "unless they could find a ride to Dallas or Mac."

Likewise, Soderberg said that "our people out here, the Elders, don't always feel like going to town to shop, and now they have neighbors that go and pick (the produce) up. Right here, every week, they have their vegetables and fruit; and (that's a benefit in) the diet of most Elders, who are diabetic."

A few rules to consider:

- All baskets must be picked up during a 15-minute window on Saturdays.
- If a customer is unable to pick up a basket after making a Monday contribution, somebody else may pick it up as long as they have the receipt.
- The produce in unclaimed baskets is donated to the local fire station serving the community.
- People picking up produce are expected to bring a basket or other conveyance to carry the produce home.
- Payment is by debit or credit card only; neither cash nor EBT cards nor other forms of public assistance are accepted.

"I think the value is there," said Social Services Manager Dave Fullerton, whose department works with many families that could benefit from low-cost produce. "The accepted payment method," he

said, "may be a barrier to families involved in Social Services."

The co-op has been operating in Grand Ronde since May 2012, delivering between 20 to 40 baskets each Saturday. The Grand Ronde outlet is capable of providing 96 baskets each week, Gehrke said.

At the moment, Soderberg and his wife, Kathy, are among Tribal members who are participating. Their son, Steven Soderberg and his wife, Ronnee, also are participating, as is Reina Nelson and her family.

"I get the baskets every week," Soderberg said. "I eat the food, I eat my own food, too (including protein-like steak or crab salad). I'm a diabetic and my blood (sugar) has never been this good my whole life. I've lost 12 pounds. It's just good." Soderberg has been a member of the co-op for the last month.

"It changes people's dinner tables and lives one basket at a time," Gehrke added. "I have seen it change their lives and health. When you go home and the kids are asking for apples instead of candy, you are doing a good thing."

Gehrke is scheduled to attend the Sunday, April 7, Tribal Council meeting to give a short pitch on the program and to answer questions. Meanwhile, she encourages interested parties to contact her at 406-450-1953 to set up an account or to answer other questions. ■

Nightmare of two years continues

FIRE continued from front page

a fire almost two years ago.

In the interim, the Butlers have wrangled with their lawyer, insurance company, a group of arbitrators and, today, the family has no house, not enough money to rebuild and a future that looks increasingly bleak.

Farmers Insurance Group, according to the Butlers, has paid \$165,000 to the bank holding the mortgage on the destroyed house. The bank released \$41,000 to a contractor for gutting the place, but the process of rebuilding "came to a screeching halt," in Donna's words, "when Yamhill County refused to issue a permit to rebuild."

The insurance company, say the Butlers, disagreed with the county over the need for rebuilding the house's foundation.

Even if the sides could agree on the foundation, the more than \$100,000 left in the bank is not nearly enough to rebuild, the Butlers say.

Farmers, Donna said, "didn't take the word of Yamhill County about the foundation. They brought out their own engineer who said the foundation could be fixed."

In addition, the Butlers said, they have been arguing with the insurance company over replacement costs for furnishings lost in the fire.

"There are all kinds of things in the policy that goes against you," said Alton.

One adjuster told Donna that "we are Walmart and Target people, and



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Columns that used to be on the front of Tribal Elder Alton Butler and his wife Donna's house lay on the ground near what is left of the Sheridan home, the basement, after a fire destroyed it two years ago.

there's no way our kids have name-brand items," Donna said, though she brought in receipts, some going back 20 years, for items.

She said that an insurance company attorney asked her, "How can you afford all these things when you work for the Tribe?"

Farmers sent the family \$9,000 in living expenses and \$17,000 to 20,000 for lost house contents.

"We used the contents money to live," said Donna.

"We just want to let people know what it is like to have a fire and get benefits from an insurance company," said Alton, from the living area of the motor home that now sits on the four-acre property's driveway.

The Butlers have a lease-to-own arrangement for the mobile home.

This mobile home is not their first. Farmers issued them two others — from Katrina — just after the fire.

"The first one had electrical problems," said Donna. "The second had mold and mildew and water problems."

The Butler's 3,200-square-foot house with two floors and a basement burned in an electrical fire on March 2, 2011. A passing contractor woke the family up and quickly put a tarp over the remains to keep it from degrading further.

"The guys who tarped it haven't been paid yet," said Alton.

"They owe us a whole lot more that they don't intend to pay," said Donna.

"We weren't able to build a home or fix our home with what Farmers paid. They low-balled us and there is not enough money to build a house. We have no house now. We live on the property in a motor home. This whole experience with Farmers has been a total nightmare."

In response to numerous questions about the settlement, the company said through spokesman Mark Toohey, "This claim was considered and reviewed by an arbitration panel and the arbitration panel, after considering testimony and hearing arguments from both sides, unanimously concluded that the claim was handled appropriately and that Farmers paid what was owed to its customer."

Ron Fredrickson, manager of Consumer Advocacy Unit in the Oregon Insurance Division, said that in situations when an insurance company and policy holder don't agree, each side can appoint an appraiser of their choice, with the two appraisers picking an umpire to resolve the problem.

"That was never brought up," said Alton.

"A lot of things about this I find troubling," said Fredrickson, "and would love to have one of our people take a look at it. Insurance is complicated. We're here to show people how it works and to coach them through the process."

The Butlers are in the process of filing a complaint with Fredrickson's office. ■