

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
 For the Siuslaw News

Leo Stapleton



“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

While that slogan describes Leo Stapleton’s 20 years as a former rural carrier for the Florence postal service, it sums up his current work supplying medical equipment at no charge to people in need. It also reflects his lifelong passion: helping others in all weather, at all hours.

“Some weeks I don’t stop from daylight to dark,” Leo said. “If there’s an emergency, if it’s a weekend, I don’t care; they’re going to get what they need.”

Although he retired from the USPS in 1996, Leo devoted another 20 years to volunteer endeavors. For the past three years, he has made it his mission to collect, clean and repair used medical equipment, lending out walkers and wheelchairs to the disabled. Turning his home into a warehouse and operating out of the Elks Lodge thrift store, Leo often works seven days a week at his own personal expense and will not accept any payment in return.

According to him, the word around town is “If you need it, Leo will get one.”

“My objective is to supply everybody’s needs so they can get outside and enjoy life,” he said. “I really enjoy taking care of people and keeping them mobile.”

While it’s no simple task, Leo doesn’t let things like weekends or

the weather, or even “feeling under it,” deter him. The indefatigable 82-year-old rises early every morning to make his rounds for the cause.

“I get tired sometimes,” he said. “But knowing the good it’s doing motivates me to keep going.”

A recent bout of walking pneumonia didn’t stop Leo from making his appointed rounds. Instead, he got on his feet to help others get on theirs.

“Four families still found me,” Leo said with a laugh, describing how he supplied a walker, wheelchair, shower stool and bedside commode. “I felt the worst I ever have in my life, but I never miss helping people out.”

That includes bringing cookies to the VA hospital in Roseburg for 22 years. As a retired veteran who looks out for his military family, Leo traces his Navy roots back to his teens.

Born in Colorado to a farm worker with 11 children, Leo moved to Oregon at age 7 when his family traveled west to follow the harvest, eventually moving to Florence in 1947.

“I didn’t want to get stuck behind a desk,” he said. “I just wanted to join the Navy my whole life.”

So Leo enlisted at 17 and began a 24-year Navy career as an aerial photographer in 1951.

“The secret to happiness is to love what you do and do what you love.”

—LEO STAPLETON

“I thought I died and went to heaven,” he said, describing how he got the chance while stationed in California to work with famous photographer Ansel Adams.

When Leo retired from the Navy, he made a beeline back to Florence,

turning down big jobs with Kodak to work in construction and the lumber yards in the town he loved instead.

It was love at first sight when Leo met Shirley and proposed on their first date. Now married 57 years, the couple raised two children and adopted two others.

“Florence was the place I always called home,” Leo said. “It’s the friendliest place in the world.”

He fondly recalls sitting around the pot belly stove at Bill Karnowski’s outboard motor repair shop under the shadow of the Siuslaw River Bridge, listening to Bill’s yarns about how he helped build it in the 1930s.

“People here help each other,” Leo said. “If anybody needs something, this community makes sure they get it. You can’t find that anywhere. It’s a loving, caring town that’s a magnet for volunteers. Wherever I go, I’m proud to say I’m from here.”

Leo joined the postal service in 1976, delivering more than just mail to the folks on his route. Whether bringing fresh crab to shut-ins or supplying “milk and hogs,” Leo became a surrogate Santa for what he calls “the little folks” of the Florence community. Once he took time off from his job, without pay, to move a crippled woman on his route to her new home.

After retiring in 1996, he devoted nine years to assisting local fishermen for 14 to 16 hours a day. Nicknamed the “Dockside Saint,” Leo unloaded the boats, ran the hoists and fixed the ice machine, often during the wee hours before dawn.

“I did whatever they needed and it was mostly things that would’ve never gotten done,” he said.

His pay?
 “I got lots of fish and crab,” he

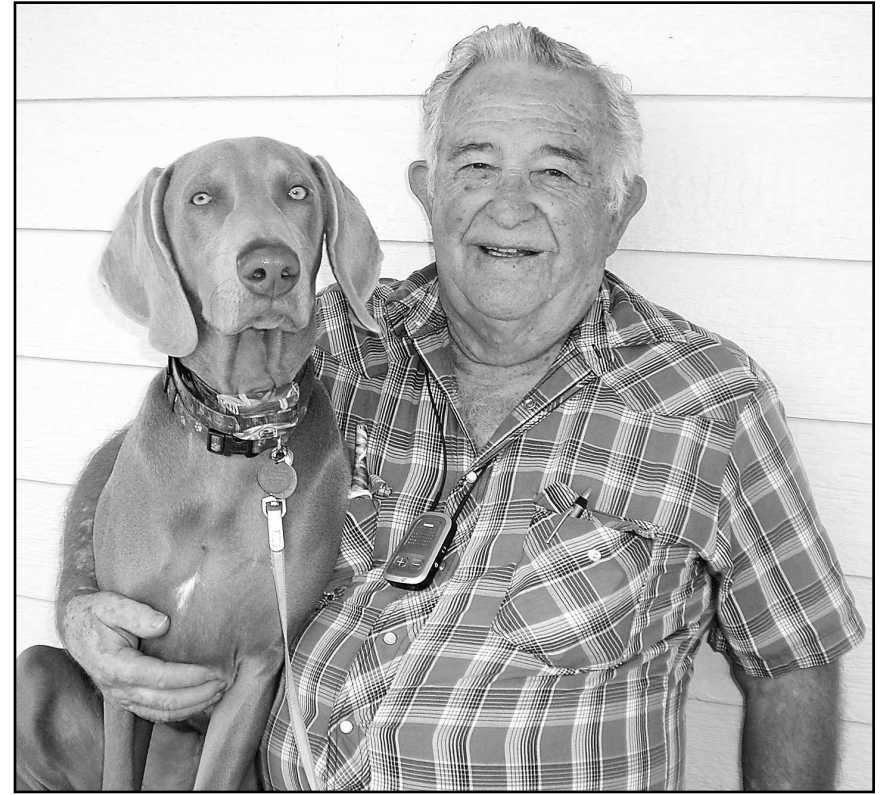


PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Leo Stapleton volunteers from dawn to dusk with his dog Rockin’ Bob at his side, “helping folks in need in the friendliest town in the world.”

boasted. “But the best part was giving away sand dollars.”

Leo pulled dozens of sand dollars from the crab traps, bleaching them and handing them out around town. He also volunteered for Florence Food Share and served 28 years on the Lane County Road Advisory Committee.

“I did it so I could help all the poor people,” he said. “I really enjoy looking out for the interests of the little guy.”

That includes kids, and one of Leo’s most memorable equipment “matches” came when he found a wheelchair for a 3-year-old. The family sent Leo a photo of the child visiting the Oregon Zoo in Portland.

“That one was worth a million to me,” he said. “It was the best payoff.”

Leo started out with four crutches, four walkers and one wheelchair. Today he has over 200 walkers and 40 wheelchairs loaned out and, on an average week, he assists six or seven families.

“This is just who I am and what I love doing,” he said. “The secret to happiness is to love what you do and do what you love. The good Lord put me here to help people and I’m just doing my best to live up to it.”

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJRditor@gmail.com.

LETTERS

Delightful DMV

I moved to Florence in August 2015 and of course you must make several changes because of the move, which includes DMV. I was dreading this because all dealings with the Arizona DMV are nightmares, extremely rude and downright mean clerks that go out of their way to make your visit to their office as impossible as they can.

Well, what a delight it was to visit the Florence DMV — pleasant clerks with smiles on their faces, professional work ethics, great sense of humor and just an enjoyable 30 minutes. I have had to go in on four occasions for additional vehicle registration items and each time it was the same atmosphere from all the employees.

What a joy to take care of the necessary DMV business dealings in nice surroundings with great one-on-one service. Thank you.

Ralph Jackson
 Florence

Assault weapons

Are assault weapons “hardware”? I think not. Rather, they probably are a good revenue source. I cannot think of a good reason for a hardware store — in this case True Value Hardware — to carry assault weapons for sale.

This is a small community. Very few fences or gates. Everyone is friendly. Neighbors help



each other.

After many people dead from mass shootings just in the last month, why, in a town like this, does any store carry assault weapons?

Madelyne Barnett
 Florence

Hillary’s emails

The political conversations regarding Hillary Clinton’s emails: I guess Hillary was lucky during her service as Secretary of State. She didn’t have any hacking of her emails.

I asked Google, “What year was the FBI hacked?” and it turns out that the FBI, the CIA, the DHS and many other government agencies have been hacked “for years.”

Maybe the government should consider hiring Hillary’s email server. “Let he who is without guilt cast the first stone.” Seems to me I have heard that one since I was young boy.

Al Anderson
 Florence

LETTERS POLICY

Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer’s full name, address and phone number for verification. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity.

Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published. All submissions become the property of Siuslaw News and will not be returned.

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