

**Coast** from 1A

time, helps out with the Siuslaw Public Library and helps hang the Christmas garlands in Historic Old Town.

Along the way, he has learned the good sides of volunteerism, the downsides and has gained a keen understanding of what philanthropy in the Siuslaw region is, and what it can become.

When Mealer first arrived in Florence, he was faced with something that almost all retirees are faced with after the initial thrill of throwing away the shackles of the daily grind: boredom.

"I had been busy all my life, so just sitting at home and watching Jeopardy isn't going to happen," he said. "I had been a gardener for a long time. Food share (was) looking for volunteers for gardening. So that started the ball."

When he first arrived at Florence Food Share, the garden was small, just a tiny section on the north side of the property. Despite its stature, it would still take hours to maintain. One of the biggest challenges was watering.

"When I was first here, you had to hand water the plants three hours a day," Mealer said.

To help alleviate the problem, Florence Food Share turned to one of the major components of all nonprofits: grants.

**"You can't make up a story"**

Funding a nonprofit organization is a complicated process, using everything from grants to bake sales.

Grants are an often-misunder-

stood source of funding for non-profit organizations, and sometimes that misunderstanding can be hugely detrimental.

Florence Food Share saw this first hand with the expansion of their building, which they were forced to do as a result of new requirements from Lane County. To pay for the expansion, the organization turned to grants, along with private donations specifically set aside for the project. The money couldn't be used for anything else.

But when the expansion began in earnest, cash donations plummeted, which were vital to the day-to-day operations, like payroll and utilities.

Food share executives saw that the public's perception of that expansion gave the impression it was "rolling in the dough."

"Grantors don't like to fund operations," Mealer said. "Grantors like to fund projects — capital improvements and things. For those things, grants are the lifeblood. But most likely these are going to be restricted funds. You have to be specific on what you use the money for and what it's going to do. You have to tell a compelling story. And you can't make up a story."

For the garden, the beginning of the story was the watering problems the volunteers were having in the garden.

Food Share turned to the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and the Siuslaw Indians for a grant to help with this. The tribes awarded the nonprofit a grant that would build up the garden's irrigation system, taking rainwater and running it

through drip systems that were set to timers.

The story ended with no more hand watering, and the grantors loved the ending.

"(The tribe) actually came down here a couple years later to check it out, and they were impressed," Mealer said.

But an organization can't rely solely on grants for a number of reasons. First, they can be really hard to get.

The process can be time consuming, with some grants taking up to a year to write. And often, there are multiple entities competing for the same grant.

Being awarded a grant is never guaranteed. If the food share's refrigerator breaks down and the program waits for a grant to fix it, there's a real possibility the refrigerator will remain broken for years.

Even if an organization is awarded a grant, the paperwork can be overwhelming. Every step of the project has to be documented; plans have to be followed to a T, receipts have to be collected, reports have to be filed. Countless hours can be spent just to justify the grant, let alone the work that goes into implementing it.

And then sometimes, long-term grants just disappear.

Mealer spoke of a grant that helped fund the garden twice a year for two years, but then the funding stopped.

"They said, 'Okay, we gave you money for two years, and now you have to go somewhere else,'" Mealer said.

The donor organization wanted to spread the money around to different organizations to help as diverse a population as possible.

"You can't rely on grants because you can't always have capital projects. You can't just say, 'We're going to build this, this and this.' You build all this capital improvement, then who's going to run it? You got to have the backstream," he said.

That backstream leads to what can be a real financial backbone of a nonprofit: endowments.

**"That's where the bacon is"**  
Almost every organization has

operational costs that include paid staff, benefits and monthly expenses like utility bills or standard maintenance. A healthy endowment can fund operational costs for years.

"That's where the bacon is," Mealer said.

For instance, an individual can will their property to an organization's endowment fund after they pass away. The organization sells the property and puts the cash in the fund.

"But you don't want to draw the principle, you just want to take off the interest," Mealer explained. "If it's four percent of half a million dollars, that's fairly good money that you can use in your operations."

But it's not just big donations like a home that can fund endowments. Small donations can be given too, and it's done for various reasons. One of the biggest is tax write-offs.

But some organizations don't have endowments to build interest on, especially ones in their infancy.

That leads to the final way nonprofits get money: cold calling and bake sales.

"You have to be able to cold call," Mealer said. "Board members that are salesmen or car dealers, they're the best. You have to convince (those who donate) that you do a feel-good thing for them to donate to, or to put in their will to fund their operation. You have to be a salesman."

Those who run nonprofits spend a large portion of their time calling individuals for donations, or holding fundraisers to fill their operational costs.

"Money doesn't come from on high with this big bucket of cash. You have to pound the pavement," Mealer said.

When someone does donate to an organization, their name goes on a donor list.

"Every organization has a donor list," Mealer said. "It's a prized, private list. These are our donors. They don't share that. That's just your list. That's the people you ask for funds. But that's the key for any of these organizations, is getting donations. That's what helps this thing run."

But sometimes those donor lists can run dry.

"You gotta be careful that you don't overwhelm your donor base," Mealer said. "What they'll

say is, 'I'm tapped out, I can't give anymore.' Especially if you're cold calling, they might say, 'Not this year. I've already donated to this.'"

The donor lists can also lead to competition between organizations, which don't share their lists. This contributes to a lack of cooperation, which Mealer thinks is the biggest problem facing the region's nonprofits today.

"SOS does its little thing and they support these programs," Mealer said. "Helping Hands is doing a lot of the same things, as is Catholic Community Services. We don't talk. A lot of times there's reluctance because we have our donors. This is our money and grants and we don't want to let people compete. It's crazy.... We need to play nice."

"If you have three different organizations that apply for a big honker grant, (grantors) like that. They like community collaboration to fund something. That's my banner that I'm flagging. I want to get everybody together. How can we collaborate and work smarter, and be able to share resources and collaborate to help the community?"

Organizing can also help the clients these nonprofits serve feel more human, Mealer believes. Clients can feel ashamed to get the services they desperately need.

"There is a stigma," Mealer said. "There are a lot of people in this town who qualify to come (to food share), but they won't."

Mealer brought up clothing donations. There are multiple organizations in town that donate clothing, from churches to SOS to sporadic fundraisers throughout the year, but accepting these donations can be uncomfortable, or even dehumanizing. Instead, Mealer prefers vouchers.

"Personally, I'm really a big fan of using Saint Vincent DePaul because everybody uses it," he said. "People that have income and jobs go shopping there. And so, instead of going to SOS to get free clothes, give them a voucher to go shopping. It gives somebody the self-respect that they're going to the same place that everybody else goes to get discount clothes, and they're not going to SOS to get handouts. ... That's one of the things, for a client, to feel like you're not downtrodden."

Not only would this help alleviate some possible shame for those who accept the donations, he

believes, but possibly help change the mind of those who condemn them. Whenever programs like SOS are brought up in conversation, negative comments toward clients can be prevalent — "they're just a bunch of transients."

"That's the misconception," Mealer said. "We live on Highway 101. In the summertime, you're going to get transients. That's just the nature of the beast. Most of the people who go to food share aren't transients. These are people who live here and have three jobs and they're trying to survive. It's like fake news. It's people telling someone, 'Yeah, it's just a bunch of old bums and transients who are taking away food from my baby.' I don't think it's really widespread, but it's out there."

To overcome that misconception, Mealer advocates inviting people into these organizations to see what work they actually do, which leads to the most important part of volunteerism: people.

**"Are you just a bunch of old white guys?"**

As a volunteer coordinator for the Van Fans, Mealer has seen a whole host of reasons people volunteer. The program provides transportation to Eugene for local residents with cancer. Driving the bus can make palms sweat.

"There's a lot of risk there, especially if you drive Highway 126," Mealer said. "You're in a big honking bus that goes 55 miles per hour. Everybody hates you because you're going 55. And you have the lives of cancer patients behind you."

Why in the world would someone go through that?

"I've gotten every answer you can think of," Mealer said. "It's cancer survivors. 'I rode that bus, I want to do it.' I also get people who say, 'I'm bored. I don't have anything to do.' It runs the gamut. Everybody has different reasons why they do things. A lot of it is companionship. Community. Basically, you have a core group of people that work together. You don't work anymore and you want to be part of society. A lot of people here who run the pantry, it's the same crew that works. And they get along together."

And the people who do

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