

**Volunteers** from 6A

From giving out home-cooked meals three times a week to simply lending an ear and warm embrace, the volunteers of Helping Hands have been making the world a better place for those who've fallen on hard times.

"It feeds people that are hungry," Thies said about the program. "It gives them a place to have camaraderie and friendship.

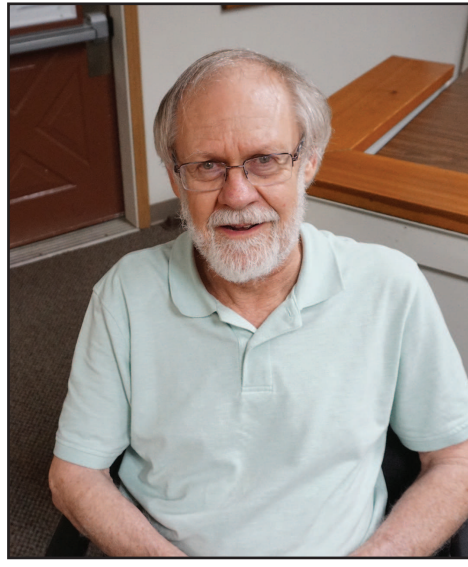
"We're human beings. We all need contact. We all need food. We all need friendship. Touch. It's important. Believe it or not, most of us are huggers, so we give a lot of hugs. It's important because you can see the people appreciating it."

Thies is a snowbird, living six months in Arizona and six months in Florence, moving back and forth with her husband.

Thies is a former accountant, but those days are behind her. She's also seen her fair share of hard times.

"I was a single mom for five years," she said. "When you have kids who drink a gallon of milk every day, stuff like that gets hard. Did I reach out for help? No. Because I was one of these stubborn people who thought they could make it on their own. But it was really difficult.

"And if there was a program like this, I'm not even sure I would have gone myself out of pride. God forbid people know we're struggling, right? Because we lived in a small town where everybody knew everything. But I've been where a lot of these people are. I didn't live in my car



**From left, Robert Orr, James Dale Guy and Jo-Anna Thies are just three of the Siuslaw region's many volunteers. Florence celebrated volunteers during National Volunteer week, April 15 to 21.**

PHOTOS BY JARED ANDERSON/SIUSLAW NEWS

and wasn't homeless, but I was dead poor."

Before she came to Florence, Thies worked at Meals on Wheels. Arriving here, she heard about Helping Hands and decided she could lend her own hand. Except, she called the wrong group.

"I called the Methodist Church by mistake," she said. "I ended up I volunteering there."

She was speaking about the Florence Community Suppers program, which she still volunteers at to this day and loves every minute of it.

Five years ago, the former president of Helping Hands came in to help at the suppers and invited Thies to lend her hand at Helping Hands as well. Now she works both programs, along with volunteering at Florence Food Share.

Why does she do it?

"Because I can," she said. "Because it's needed. When I worked for Meals on Wheels, I saw how important it was when

you're the only person they'll see all day. It's just something I thoroughly enjoy. I go home happy and exhausted. I don't think there's ever been one time that I went home not happy. I don't think ever."

Most of Thies' time spent at Helping Hands is serving meals. She knows how to cook — she was a mother of four, she points out — but usually leaves that to other volunteers.

"Ninety-nine percent of the meals we make are from scratch," Thies said. "If there's something going on and we don't have the facility, Glen will go and get sub-sandwiches. We also have a Friday lunch to go, which has water and food and things that don't necessarily have to be heated, because people don't necessarily have the ability to do that."

The program helps a wide variety of people, from locals who are homeless to those who are having difficulty making ends meet.

"Most of our guests actually work," she said. "But when you try and pay rent in Florence, and you're not earning that much, all your money goes to rent and the utilities. There's not a lot left over. This is another way for them to get a good solid meal three times a week, and then go to the churches the other two days. I think it's just the cost of living here."

It's been hard for the organization as well. After Helping Hands losing its lease on its original building a few years back, the group has been bouncing from church to church, looking for a permanent home. Right now, the coalition is based out of New Life Lutheran Church on Spruce Street.

"They made room for us and they've been really kind," Thies said. "We all have the same attitude here — 'But for the grace of God go I.'"

In addition, housing isn't the only problem that Helping Hands has. The coalition also has trouble finding volunteers, something that Thies sees affecting all the organizations she works with. "All the groups need help," she said. "You don't have to be on your feet if that's a problem. I don't have an answer as to why [people aren't volunteering]. People burn out, I guess, but the more volunteers you have, the less burnout you're going to have."

As for Thies, she doesn't think she'll ever burn out.

"I feel totally whole doing this," she said. "In my heart, it's a good thing because I'm giving back. I feel truly blessed for all that I have."

**ASPIRE Student Mentoring — Siuslaw High School**

Robert Orr had plans for retirement.

"I wouldn't be sitting," he said. "As my wife knows I don't sit very well."

He was going to do wood-working in the woodshop he has at his home, taking time to build whatever his house needed.

"And sailing is my first love in terms of sports," Orr said. "I would be doing more sailing and kayaking. And more boating."

Orr and his wife Cindy were teachers by trade, working at their last schools in New Jersey for 13 years.

"I loved it, loved teaching," he said. "Cindy was teaching high school math, more advanced courses like Calculus, and I was teaching middle school algebra and geometry. I was also teach-

ing more advanced students, but at the middle school level."

The Orrs bought a home here five years ago, stealing away vacations whenever they had the time. But the "allure of Florence," as he put it, kept calling them.

Two years ago, they decided to take the plunge and take on full retirement, moving here permanently with thoughts of toiling away at their hobbies and volunteering a little bit here and there.

"Apparently, I really wasn't ready to retire yet," he said.

Orr began to list the number of organizations that he ended up volunteering for. He's a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), a substitute teacher and is a Dunes City Councilor, which he finds "completely fascinating," learning how the city operates and what issues faces it. He also volunteers for "some other things," which he didn't elaborate on.

"My wife said that this was practically a foregone conclusion that this would happen," he said. "She knows that I don't sit still and that I love this kind of work."

But the biggest volunteering project? The Oregon ASPIRE mentoring program at Siuslaw High School.

ASPIRE is a statewide organization that helps students prepare for life after high school. The primary goal is figuring out how to get students into college, including admissions and financial aid.

"Over a year ago, Boudinot Kilgore knew I was interested in volunteering and asked if I wanted to talk. I was looking for something that I could really spend some time doing and feel good about. So the actual fit was just right. I went from having a couple of students that I was coming in for once or twice a week to being here every day, all day."

He absolutely loves it. "I find that I don't even like to take half a day off," Orr admitted. "That means that several meetings with students that I could have had can't happen because I'm not here."

"I love the work. The students are wonderful, and so is the staff. They're great people. Everybody wants the same thing here, and that's the to give the best to the students."

He said that the work can be complicated for students.

"The federal student aid application is, on the surface, straightforward. But there are questions that can arise. Maybe students

are living with one parent, but another parent lives elsewhere. Or perhaps they're living with grandparents who don't have legal custody of the children," Orr said. "These kinds of questions can get complicated."

For a student who is working to get good grades, participating in school-sponsored programs, like sports, working an actual job and just enjoying the final years of their childhood, those complications can get, well ... complicated, Orr said. Especially if they've never had any experience in it.

"We certainly want them to do what they can on their own," he said, but even the most organized student can need a helping hand.

The complications go beyond just filling out federal forms. Scholarships that are given out locally often require essays, which the staff of 15 ASPIRE volunteers tutors students to write.

Volunteers also provide students with comprehensive lists of the scholarships, reminding them of deadlines and helping them organize all the information they need to provide.

"One of the things that we've started doing is helping to prepare the students for the SAT or the ACT," Orr said. "The more practice the students can get, and the more information the students can get about those tests, the better off they'll be"

He has also worked with school counselors to create booklets on what to expect in college life in a larger city, especially important for youth whose only experience is a small town.

"What we gather here are the pieces of the puzzle so that we can provide information to the students that we have gathered in a central location," Orr said.

For Orr, the benefits of ASPIRE go beyond just helping the students discover a path to their future.

"I think a healthy community depends on healthy children," he said. "I wouldn't want to leave out the possibilities of students coming back, getting some experience and education, and helping build this community."

Then he takes it a step further. "We, at all levels of this community, have a need for good jobs. There's a need for doctors. There's a need for other professionals. To me, a healthy school that is graduating students who have a direction, who are moving on to things that they want to do, whether it's college or trade school or work, helps attract other people to the community. I think if the people understand the relationship between the school and the community, there's a better chance the community will support the needs of the school, large or small."

And it's the entire community that helps the ASPIRE program exist. If it wasn't for the scholarships that organizations provide, then the students wouldn't be able to afford the ability to build the community that the Siuslaw needs.

"With the scholarships and the support the students receive, there's a real blending or melding of purpose," Orr said. "For that to exist is helpful to many parts of the community. For example, the clubs: Rotary, the Lion Club, the Oddfellows, Kiwanis. These clubs are very much involved in raising funds for their scholarships and in supporting the students in other ways. I think that gives people who are involved with these organizations a sense of purpose. So I think that's good for them."

In all, those organizations exist because of volunteers.

"I believe that volunteering provides services to the community that are needed," Orr said. "While I happen to be enthusiastic about this program, I see all the other things done in this community that are hugely important."

"People volunteer for a number of different reasons, but I think there is a great benefit to the volunteers themselves. It gives us a sense of purpose. It gives us a sense of meaning. And I think there are a lot of people who would be lost without their volunteering opportunities."

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