

HELPING from page 1A

But what sounded like a nice night out for warm beverages on the river turned out to be a handoff of Graham's life work. Graham was graduating in a few years and was wondering if Ava would be willing to take over.

"And we just looked at her and said, 'Yeah ...'" Ava recalled. "We were excited, but we were nervous! It's her baby that she's been taking care of for eight years. Kaylee had done such a good job, and we were afraid we would just mess it up." Ella added, "She left big shoes to fill."

"Yeah, like size 14," Ava said, jokingly.

Graham asked Ava to help out three years ago, when Graham was entering her fifth year of Power of Florence. Ava thought it would be fun to ask her lifelong friend Faith to help.

"Faith was always cool and responsible and would keep me in check if I started going crazy," Ava said. "I start procrastinating. Faith says, 'You know, why don't you sit down and write this essay.'"

The two met in first-grade, two shy students who sat across from each other. Their teacher, Shannon Graham — mother to Kaylee — had a system where students could write notes to one another in class.

"I would write, 'Hi Faith!' and deliver it to her," Ava said. "And she would write back."

Even though they were sitting right next to each other, they became pen pals, figuring out plans for the weekend, including drawing pictures of a zip line that Faith had in her backyard.

"It was a little stick figure Faith going down the zip line. And it was misspelled, because it was first-grade," Ava said.

The two have stuck by each other's side ever since, frequently going on surfing trips.

"It was a natural fit," Ella said.

The girls had also done volunteering together, including a class challenge to buy as much food as possible for \$20 to donate to Florence Food Share. That was also in first grade.

"How do you even remember that?" Faith asked Ava.

"I don't know, I just remember having a lot of fun that day," Ava said. "That was a cool day, to see what impact we could have as kids on our community."

Volunteering has been a big part of Ava's life. One of her favorite duties is helping to maintain the Little Libraries at Florence Food Share and the CROW Center for the Performing Arts.

"It's like a little library that you can put books in. You can take them, keep them, put new books in, take them out and read them," Ava said.

She has accepted book donations for the past several years during the Power of Florence Party in the Parking Lot.

As for Faith? She shrugged her shoulders, smiled and said, "I don't know, I'm really boring."

She's not.

Her family frequently combs the community beaches for trash that has washed ashore.

"There's a lot of weird stuff on the beach," she said. "One time I found a spork. And a toothbrush."

Faith did not find them sitting next to each other, however; "That would have been really weird," she said.

Ava and Faith have also been working together on a variety of other volunteer programs, including helping the U.S. Forest Service record fish populations in Knolls Creek.

"Once a week, we would go at the fish trap and collect all the fish and record them — their length and weight and what type of fish they were," said

Faith. "It was fun going into the water. We had chest waders and we would go super deep."

"Unnecessarily deep," Ava added.

And, as everyone knows, being unnecessarily deep in a creek is what makes it fun. And fun is what volunteering is all about.

"To me, that's the coolest part of volunteering and why our families have had so much fun working together," Ella said. "We get to watch our kids make a big difference, and that's a great thing."

As for fun during the Power of Florence, Ava is particularly fond of the organizations that remove the noxious weed Scotch broom, an invasive species.

"There's the Scotch broom removal at Joshua Lane by the Oregon Dunes Restoration Collaborative," Ava said. "You get to go out into the dunes and tear up a bunch of Scotch broom, which is really fun. You get these big hand saws and just get to destroy Scotch broom that's taking over the dunes."

But being in charge of such a large and venerated event certainly has work that goes beyond having fun in the sand.

From helping to sign up new volunteering programs, promoting the event and making sure everything runs smoothly,

the two girls and their families have sunk a lot of hours in the Power of Florence.

And this year the pressure is really on, being the first time the two are completely in charge.

"Last year, we called up Kaylee and were like, 'So, do you know who helped us with this last year?'" Ava said. "And she would answer that. But now she's on vacation out of country. So we have to do a lot more things on our own and we're feeling the pressure more this year than last year."

There's a lot to organizing the event beyond just shepherding volunteer groups. There's also setting up generators for the various events around towns, ordering stages and acquiring sound equipment.

"There's so many pieces from 100 different people in town and trying to make them all together for Saturday morning is a lot, but it's been going great," Ella said. "It's just going to be fun from here on out. I'm excited."

And with the bulk of the community stepping up to help with the event, it's nearly impossible to fail.

Plus, there will be a snow cone and crêpe food truck at the third annual Florence Regency Carnival, right across the street from the Party in the Parking Lot.

"And a dunk tank," Ava added. "I don't see how it can go wrong when we have those."

While the actual event is set to run smoothly, there's one thing that both girls are still weak in the knees about: speaking about the event on the stage at the parking lot.

"I'm still thinking about the speech," Faith said. "It's at the Party in the Parking Lot at 11:45 a.m. It's like having to do a speech in class, but it's a ton more people, and they're mostly adults."

But, as the two have done throughout their lives, they will have each other's back.

"We decided that we're going to do the same speech together," Ava said, comforting her friend. "A joint speech. It's going to be thanking different organizations for coming together and helping for the Power of Florence and volunteering and supporting us."

And that spirit of giving thanks is what the event is all about.

"It's important to help people in the town who've helped me," Ava said. "It's worth giving back. Like in school, with teachers being really good to you and helping you learn stuff. And you want to help them. Everybody is living in this town. You've got to help out in some

way."

Having kids like Faith and Ava showing that youth can play an important part in volunteerism is just as important as the work that is done.

"I think kids think, 'Oh, I'll do that when I'm an adult,' but they don't realize they can do it when they're really young," Faith said.

Plus, there's the Van Fans Ice Cream Social at the end of the day at the Florence Events Center.

"Okay, so you walk in and then you can get raffle tickets and pie," Ava said. "And you get in this line with a paper plate and they give you a slice of pie, and you get to get a big scoop of ice cream. And you get to get seconds on the ice cream."

Ella joked, "This is what they're in it for, right? This is clearly the motivation. If you work hard all day volunteering, why not celebrate with ice cream?"

"It's the best," Ava said.

After the ice cream social, the three tabulate all the numbers of the days, the number of volunteers, the hours worked.

But after that?

"We'll probably go over to Faith's house," Ava said. "We'll sit down and say, 'Well, that's over. Time to work on next year.'"

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A 4-harness direct tie-up counterbalance 1951 Allen Loom, built in Milwaukie, Oregon, and woven on by three generations of the Peckham family of Mapleton, was donated to the Pioneer Museum by Peckham with the hope that "real words involving inspiring others to weave if I remember right!"

The warping process will continue every Saturday at the museum (noon to four) until the job is done and weaving commences. All weavers are welcome to come and help or share ideas, including (1) what we could do next and (2) what commitment we can collectively make to assure that the loom remains an active, interactive, part of our community. That four-hour window offers a good opportunity for Florence area weavers to get to know each other.

Spinners, there is room on the same floor of the Pioneer Museum to bring your spinning wheels to share your craft and maybe inspire some new spinners too. The museum has a few spinning wheels, none near operational.

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