

KETTLE from page 1A

“We also have a floater,” said Red Kettle coordinator Sandy Kuhlman, who was working the other end of Fred Meyer as Reed was just finishing up her shift. If there’s something going on downtown or at the Florence Events Center, then that kettle gets “floated” to the next location. Kuhlman talked about what it takes to be a good ringer. “Energy,” she said. “Someone who does have a smile and a positive disposition. Scrooge doesn’t ring bells.” Kuhlman was ringing her bell on the north end of Fred Meyer. She ran down the ins and outs of getting people to come into the ringing fold, which is open to anyone who can provide the time. Finding ringers is one of Kuhlman’s primary jobs as coordinator. She works on the campaign with local resident and area coordinator Sam Spayd, who helps juggle more than 100 volunteers over the month-long period. For the local campaign, one of the biggest problems is getting out the word that 90 percent of the funds raised stay within the community, considering that Salvation Army is a global organization. In fact, the local aspect is what got Kuhlman into ringing. “It gave me a lot of confidence,” she said. The funds go to a whole host of local projects, including the Western Lane County Endowment, Florence Food Share, emergency clothing for Mapleton and Siuslaw elementary schools, tennis shoes for the Boys and Girls Club of Western Lane County cheer team and snacks for after-school sports programs at Mapleton. “Pastor Dale over at Cross Road Assembly of God has had a voucher program for local families, helping them out when they come short,” Kuhlman added. “Car broke down, do I fix the car or pay my utility

bill?” And so he has a voucher program, and that’s where the money is going to. He gets a little household budget training in there, which is great, teaching people. And it’s staying here in the community. I think that’s a huge piece.” Once people know that the money stays local, generally they’re amenable to signing up to volunteer, even for just a two-hour stint. That is, if they can find the time, a tough feat considering the amount of volunteer hours that get logged in the community. Kuhlman listed off half a dozen organizations she has been (or still is) involved with. “I’ve started to do what I call ‘situational volunteering.’ Something like this where, for a month or five weeks, it’s a little bit crazed, but it’s not an all-year commitment,” she said. “It’s hands on. One and done, a month of craziness and it’s all over.” One of the biggest selling points is that a ringer shift only lasts two hours. “That will get people that you can’t otherwise get,” Kuhlman said. Then there’s convincing people to actually sign up. Kuhlman usually sticks to asking friends, one of whom came up to compliment her and comment on her hat. “I have to buy a hat before I do this,” her friend said. “Do I need a sweater?” “No, and you can find hats at the dollar store,” Kuhlman reassured her friend. “They have a good selection.” “Well, I’ll connect with you,” the friend said as she walked away. Kuhlman smiled. “That’s a friend I’m working on,” she said. “She’s there. She has to look at her schedule. She’s talking about getting a hat. That’s a step.” Once people do sign up, there are a few tips to make the time work, starting with the actual bell ringing.

Local Salvation Army Red Kettle volunteers such as Sandy Kuhlman (right) are taking post outside of area businesses, greeting shoppers as they walk through the doors.

“You have to switch hands,” Kuhlman said. “I’m not typically ambidextrous, but you can do it.” While it’s possible to get wild with the bell ringing, holding it above the head as some colonial town crier, it would get tiring after a while. Plus, it doesn’t really work very well. Kuhlman held the bell over her head, and the bell rang with a thud. “You see, you need to be more relaxed,” she said. “But the bell is just about making the noise.” Instead, it’s best to keep your arms down, putting minimal force into ringing. The real trick is how you interact with people.

“Stay off your phone,” she said. “And don’t hang out talking to people. It makes it too easy for people to pass you. Just don’t stand here looking like you’re miserable.” Kuhlman stressed that saying a greeting when people walked in was vital. “If you’re just standing here, it’s really easy for people to just walk by. But if they’re coming in, and they’re not making eye contact with you, they’re more likely to look up when you say ‘Merry Christmas.’ They look up, you make eye contact, smile and ring the bell. That’s the key. When you walk by, it’s really hard to ignore somebody when then say Merry Christmas, they’re smiling and they’re in good cheer. You might not be able to put money in the kettle, but you’re going to say, ‘Merry Christmas.’” Kuhlman also stressed the importance of using the words “Merry Christmas.” “You should say Merry Christmas, not Happy Holidays,” she said. “You’re more likely to offend people who think it should be Merry Christmas over Happy Holidays then you are to say Merry Christmas to people who think the other. In my personal life, I would tend more to say Happy Holidays, but I’m not offended by Merry Christmas. There are people who, if you say ‘Happy Holidays’ will get offended. And so, we’re trying to be as inoffensive as possible.” The case was brought home after she said “Merry Christmas” to a man getting a shopping cart. “And happy Hanukkah, by the way,” the man said without a hint of bad blood. Hanukkah was about to begin the next day. “Absolutely!” Kuhlman replied, beaming.



“And thank you for your volunteerism!” the man said before dropping money into the kettle. “You gotta be socially sensitive,” Kuhlman said as the man walked away. “Life is full of landmines, and I try not to get blown up.” A happy greeting and being present with people are the most important parts of being a ringer, particularly for those who actively try to ignore the bell ringers. One woman barreled through the front entrance, eyes staring straight down as Kuhlman cheerily said, “Merry Christmas.” The woman never looked up. “They have to be very studious in not acknowledging you,” Kuhlman said. “They really work hard at it.”

Reed encountered the same type of people from time to time, and counted herself in that group in days past. “I think I’ve done that before,” she said, laughing. “It’s not uncommon. I think it’s normal, especially if you don’t have any extra cash to give. What I notice too is that people will sometimes just say thank you. They might not have any money to give, but they’re thanking you for being here, which is cool too.” Having cash on hand can be difficult in a card-fueled economy. When asked if she carries cash around, Reed pulled out her cell phone: Her debit card was attached.

“I don’t even carry my purse into the store,” she said. But Reed said that she’s now dipping into her coin jar to make sure that she has money to give. Kuhlman keeps cash on hand now, particularly after she began as a ringer the year prior. “Last season, I realized I couldn’t pass by because I knew what it was like to stand there and ring the bell and have people walk by and not do anything,” she said. “I would literally carry a bunch of \$1 bills in my person specifically to give. Instead of putting all my money in at one time, I do a dollar. It adds up over the course of a month. But once you’ve done it, you’re a little more empathetic

for the people standing there.” At that point, a man juggling a cup of coffee and his wallet handed Kuhlman \$1 for the kettle. “Oh, thank you!” she said while laughing. “I thought you were giving me your coffee as well.”

The “cash handoff” is rare, according to Kuhlman. “Most people put it in the bucket. It’s part of the fun. And it’s interesting, the people who roll up their money is when it’s the biggest bills. A lot of people want to give discreetly. Some people want to flash their giving. Other people will come up and reach in and put it in, and instantly start apologizing: It’s not more,” she said. “And I think one of the secrets is to thank people, regardless of what it is. It makes a difference, no matter what they’re giving you. If they give a quarter, it makes a difference. You want to encourage it that way, but make it fun.”

As to what type of people gives, it’s anyone’s guess. “I don’t have a sense of that,” she said. “A lot of times, you get surprised. ... You can’t judge. At least I haven’t figured that out. People will surprise you.”

It’s that sense of giving more than you can is what really struck Bettina Hannigan, who worked the north side Fred Meyer shift just before Kuhlman. “Sometimes the people that you least expect to give are the ones that give the most,” Hannigan said. “So, I’m sitting here, ringing the bell, and this gentleman comes out and puts a \$5 bill. Usually it’s \$1 or some change. He goes out front, then this old truck rolls up, and he puts his groceries in. It didn’t look like he had any money to spare. I was like, ‘Wow.’ It’s little things like that that give you a reality check, you know? You never know. I think sometimes people who are receivers are the best givers, because they understand how important it is.” Hannigan is a ringer because it helps the community and is a safe bet.

“It is one of the safest, most conservatively managed places to give without the overhead,”

she said. But she also just has great respect for the organization itself. “A big part of it for me is the religious portion of it,” she said. “They don’t bring just food, they bring people hope.” Hannigan said she knows someone who was with the organization for 80 years.

“He was actually a composer and in the ministry his whole life. When he was dying, the Salvation Army recorded one of his songs called ‘The Song of Songs’ on their Christmas album. And he waited until it came in the mail. He was holding on until that CD came. And he played it over and over again, and then died the next day. So, it’s those sort of sentimental connections. You never know what’s going to change someone’s life.”

For Hannigan, the simple act of greeting someone in a cheery manner is the best way to change someone’s life, including hers.

“I’m not a good hands-on person,” she said. “I don’t want to feed people, I don’t want to cook, I don’t want to vacuum the floor. But if I can do this, and it’s something I enjoy, and it helps make a difference, then the people who like the hands-on stuff can do the hands-on stuff.”

Hannigan forgoes the “Merry Christmas,” instead opting for a cheerful “Good morning” to everyone.

“Good morning!” she said as a woman rushed to the kettle. “I found a penny in the parking lot, and I think it belongs here,” she said, putting the penny in the kettle. “Thank you!” Hannigan said as they all laughed.

“This satisfies my social need for extroversion, to see everybody and be out here,” Hannigan said later on. “I enjoy the different people making a difference. For me, you give people a gift by smiling and saying hello to them. There’s no demand. You have different shapes and sizes. There was a homeless man getting his food and living his life, and God, I go home and I’ve got everything I need. ... Doing this, ringing the bell, you just get to be out. And I love to touch people’s lives. Sometimes a smile makes all the difference. Good morning ladies!”

A woman and her young niece walked up to Hannigan. “You want to ring the bell,” the woman said. Hannigan handed her bell to the girl, who took hold and rang it. And rang it. And then rang it some more. Children asking to ring the bell is one of the best parts of the job. “There was one little family that came through,” Hannigan said. “It was so cute, they had a little toddler, and she wouldn’t give the bell back.” The kids have to start learning the importance of volunteering some time. To volunteer as a Red Kettle ringer, contact Sam Spayd at 541-991-6139. To donate to the campaign, visit one of the storefront locations listed in the article, and make sure to bring cash or checks.

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