

ASHES

Continued from Page A1

As the fire grew in size and intensity south of town, a single volunteer knocked on the door of the fairgrounds office.

"He had three bags of items he wanted to donate," Weaver said.

Unique effort

That single act of kindness was the seed of a massive aid effort unlike any ever undertaken in Oregon. It was not a government initiative; instead, people from all walks of life volunteered their time and donated what they could afford. In an Eastern Oregon county with a population of 7,180, they proved that it didn't take a lot of people to have a huge impact.

Hundreds of volunteers from around the county lined up to help at the fairgrounds as trucks and buses filled with items from local stores, schools and organizations across the county and across the region poured in.

What began with three grocery bags soon ballooned to fill the entire pavilion at the fairgrounds.

"We started as a mom-and-pop store and ended up as a Costco," Weaver said.

All sorts of donated items — clothes, tools, personal hygiene items such as toothpaste and toilet paper, and appliances — arrived daily. Even the shelves they were stacked on were donated. Barrels for water arrived by the truckload, as did feed for pets and livestock.

And don't forget the sifters. James Weaver — Mary's husband — and Earl Kilpatrick made 70 sifters from wood frames and wire mesh.

Their use? "To help people find what's left in the ashes of their homes," Mary Weaver said. Personal items including hand-made tiles, even a tea cup, were rescued from the rubble using them.

Volunteers, individually and in church-sponsored groups, showed up at homesites, offering victims tools such as wheelbarrows and rakes — and help.

Individuals donated the use of their recreational vehicles to the homeless, though most were able to stay with family or friends in the area. Gardeners brought vegetables from their backyards; bakers and cooks brought trays piled high with food.

"The pavilion also became a place where people could come to talk," she said, adding that volunteers from Old West Federal Credit Union, Oregon State University Extension Service and other local organizations were especially helpful.

At the same time, hundreds of firefighters shuttled between their encampment near the fairgrounds and the front lines, stopping at the pavilion to eat and pick up their lunches — and leave donations for the victims.

The pavilion operated around the clock from the second week in August through the last week of September. The hours were "crazy long," Weaver said. But "we just did the best we could. It was the volunteers that made the difference."



Carl Sampson/The Eagle

Mindy Winegar, left, and Mary Weaver are shown in the now-empty pavilion at the Grant County Fairgrounds. The pavilion became an ad hoc relief center during the wildfires last summer.

Monetary donations

And the monetary donations began to arrive.

What began as a trickle of dollar bills and coins grew into a river of contributions for wildfire victims.

High school students in tiny Dayville — population 138 — held a spaghetti dinner and raised \$3,200. Seven-year-old Noah Baker, who lives south of the fire, raffled his hog named Meatball and donated the \$9,000 proceeds to fire victims.

The Peacemakers Quilt Guild raffled their handiwork to raise hundreds more. Even the items leftover from the relief center at the pavilion were sold in a massive yard sale, adding \$17,000 to the relief fund, Weaver said.

Beyond the county line, private and corporate donors from as far away as New York sent checks, their only way of helping from a distance.

The Community Fire Relief Fund totaled \$244,615.31 as of last week, said Ken Olson, the president and CEO of the credit union who coordinated the accounting of the cash contributions.

Donations came in amounts ranging from \$5 to \$5,000, said Weaver, the fairgrounds manager.

As the contributions piled in, Weaver, Olson and others began to worry how best to account for it and, more importantly, disburse it to the fire victims who needed it most.

"We just said, 'Hey, if folks want to donate we'd make sure every dollar would go to the victims,'" Olson said.

But a question loomed. "How do you be fair?" was the quandary, said Kathy Cancilla, chair of the nonprofit GREAT Corp., which fosters local economic development.

Some corporations said

they would contribute only to a nonprofit, and since it can take a year or more to set up a nonprofit corporation and gain tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service, it was decided GREAT would play a crucial role as a conduit and allow the funds to reach victims without delay.

GREAT signed a memorandum of understanding with the fire relief fund.

"As a nonprofit we couldn't provide money to individuals so the money went to the credit union fund," Cancilla said.

A board was established consisting of Weaver, Olson, Cancilla, staffers at the credit union, representatives of the faith-based community, County Judge Scott Myers and two members of the community at large.

"We had a good mix of people who understood the community and the losses," Cancilla said.

They asked County Sheriff Glenn Palmer to develop a list of victims and advertised in the newspaper and on the radio to make sure no one was missed.

The next thing they did was try to figure how best to distribute the funds, said Weaver. Members of the committee did research, asking other disaster relief groups for advice. They finally decided on a point system. If a home was lost it was so many points, if an outbuilding was lost, it was fewer points, and so on, Weaver said.

At the same time Weaver and Winegar, the secretary at the fair office, developed an intake sheet that documented the victims' needs, their losses and whether they had insurance.

Each family was also assigned a contact to keep in touch so whenever new information became available they would not get lost in the shuffle.

Some contributors earmarked their donations for specific victims. "Their wishes were passed along to the credit union to make sure it got to the right persons," Cancilla said.

The victims with the highest number of points received the highest percentage of the fund. Because money is still coming in, the same formula will be used to distribute it to victims as well, Weaver said.

"We wrote 100 checks" to victims, Olson said.

Miracles happen

Though most victims preferred to remain anonymous, one who agreed to an interview was Jason Wright. The fire left him and his wife, Amanda, and their 14-year-old daughter Carle with nothing.

"I had two pairs of pants," he said. They had been camping out of town at the time the fire struck. When they returned to their home 6.1 miles down the canyon, only rubble remained.

"It was leveled," he said. The house, the pickup truck, the four-wheeler — all gone.

"All my security went out the window," said Wright, who has been a maintenance man at the Blue Mountain Hospital in John Day for four years.

Then a miracle happened — several actually.

"People began bringing clothes, tools and supplies," he said. "People I didn't even know."

The Wrights were staying at the fairgrounds in a donated trailer when the phone rang.



Contributed photo

The pavilion of the Grant County Fairgrounds is stocked with food and supplies during the height of the wildfires that struck Grant County.

It was Kathy Stewart, who lives in Redmond, and she was offering the Wrights the use of her house in Canyon City. Her mother Becky, who is 97, had lived there until she moved to Redmond to be with her daughter. The house was fully furnished and available free of charge to the Wrights. All they had to do is pay the utilities.

And, she said, the Wrights can buy it after the first of the year if they want.

"I was just in awe," he said. He still hasn't met Stewart in person.

Wright's reactions reflect the deep feelings everyone interviewed for this story repeated time and again.

"I would not live any other place," he said. "We are so blessed."

"Thank you"

It's quiet now at the fairgrounds. Just a handful of weeks ago, it bustled with activity as families, volunteers and firefighters all meshed in a community wrought of disaster.

Mary Weaver sits at her desk in the pavilion office, chatting back and forth with Mindy Winegar.

On a table are gift cards that just arrived. Weaver is contacting victims to let them know they are available.

She leans back in her chair. "Thank you," she said.

"Thank you to all who contributed, volunteered or helped."

Her words, and the deeds of so many, will echo through the canyon for decades to come.

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