

FAMILY HELPER

Story By Erin Shae, The Gresham Outlook
This article appeared in the Outlook on Dec. 31, 2005

When Amy Hayes' husband was laid off during the recession, her family began to struggle financially.

The 27-year-old mother of five is committed to home-schooling her children, but after eight months with no income there seemed to be no answer except to go into debt – something she and her husband didn't want to do.

Despite this, having used up all of their savings and other resources, they didn't think they had a choice

Barry and Suzanne Birch founded the organization in 1992 to help the working poor – those who earn too much to qualify for food stamps or other assistance programs, but are struggling to meet their needs, Barry said.

Suzanne took over as executive director when Barry retired, but he is still actively involved in the program, tracking and weighing donations and picking up truckloads of food.

"That's what my job is – I get free stuff and give it to people who need it," Barry said, smiling. "It's the most fulfilling thing I could ever imagine. I'm retired, but I couldn't leave this. I wouldn't want to leave this."

The program has special meaning for Barry, a recovering alcoholic who once lost everything he had.

The idea for the program came after he sobered up and started going back to church.

A friend, who also had some addictive behavior issues, was attending Alcoholics Anonymous. His sponsor – a driver for the Union Gospel Mission – said he had some extra bread and wanted to know if anyone needed it. Barry asked around and found a few families who could use the food. They mentioned others who needed help and Birch Community Services was born.

Each year, the program distributes more than six million pounds of food, much of which is donated by local grocery chains, food processing companies, dairies, bakeries, farms, restaurants and wholesalers.

Families pay \$35 a month and are asked to volunteer a few hours of their time with the program if they have been using the service for more than six months.



Oregon City residents Sonya Stewart and her daughter, Anna Joy, 6 months, stock up on tangerines at Birch Community Services, 17780 N.E. San Rafael St. Stewart resigned from her job to raise her daughter and the family's income was cut in half.
Photo by Carole Archer.

With only two full-time and two part-time employees, the service relies on volunteers providing nearly 30,000 hours of service each year, Barry said.

“It’s more than just a food program – it’s really a community,” Barry. “I think the thing that’s encouraging is to see people laughing together and crying together. It’s been such a neat resource for families.”

Hayes agrees.

“People are always really cheerful and Suzanne and Barry have always gone out of their way to help us,” Hayes said. “We are really blessed.”

In addition to food and some clothing, the program provides money management classes to help participants get out of debt, as well as learn to live and eat on a budget.

Gresham resident Andrea Herbst, 36, said the money she saved on groceries helped her stretch a limited budget when her husband was forced to take a pay cut at work.

She said her husband saved enough money to go back to college and is training to be a nurse.

Although parking is always at a premium on delivery days, the aisles of the warehouse, which is located on San Rafael, just west of Northeast 181st Avenue, allow plenty of room for those browsing the week’s selections.

The warehouse is stocked with everything from fresh fruit and milk to tortillas, over-the-counter medicines, personal care items and on a good day, Barry said, toilet paper.

Each participant is assigned a specific shopping day – the warehouse is only open Monday, Wednesday and Friday – and are given 45 minutes to shop each week.

New families are accepted into the program on a referral basis only, but are interviewed to see if they are receiving assistance from other programs before being accepted.

Barry said most people are with the program for about two years before they are able to make it on their own.

“We would love to see families get to a place where they’re not dependent on this program and can look past next month to the future,” Barry said.

In addition to providing for individual families, the program donates extra food to other local organizations, such as Zarephath Pantry and Shepherd’s Door.

Barry hopes to build a 40,000-square foot warehouse on a nearby piece of property and doubled the number of families they can help.

The program recently embarked on its first capital campaign, known as Project Harvest to help make their goal a reality, and hope to raise \$2.5 million, for the proposed new building.

Building a new warehouse, rather than leasing, also makes the most sense financially, says Dave Anderson, Project Harvest Coordinator.

For more information about Project Harvest, visit www.birchcommunityservices.org.

By the numbers

660 – Number of families served

35 – Amount each family pays per month to be part of the program

600 – Average dollar value each family receives in groceries each month

6 – Number of pounds of food distributed each year in millions

45 – Amount of time in minutes each family has to shop each week

800 – Number of pairs of Danner boots the organization receives each year

10 – Number of families that are added to the program each month

5 – Average length of time, in months, most families are on the program's waiting list

2 – Average number, in years, families are part of the program

1992 – Year founded

3 – Number of times the organization had to be moved to a larger operating facility

18,000 – Total square footage of current warehouse

2.5 – amount of money in millions the organization needs to collect to build its own warehouse

The original article can be accessed online at
<http://www.theoutlookonline.com/article/9843>