

The Oregonian

'A HAND UP, NOT A HANDOUT'

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Summary: Birch Community Services aims to double the number of families it serves. Birch Community Services, an east Portland nonprofit that serves about 570 low-income families, started 12 years ago when someone asked Barry and Suzanne Birch whether they could use some extra bread.

The couple, who were midlife newlyweds, thought of three families they knew who were struggling economically. They accepted the loaves, which arrived squished in a plastic garbage bag. As soon as the Birches gave them out, more bread, and in time other grocery items, followed. In 1992, the couple were getting by on Barry Birch's income from selling office furniture, but they decided to start a service for working families who were just a little worse off than they were. Since then, the program has doubled in size about every three years.

"The families we serve are the in-betweeners," said Barry Birch, 61. "They're the working poor. They're not takers. They're looking for a hand up, not a handout."

Birch Community Services gives families about \$500 a month in groceries, which the families select from a warehouse set up like a grocery store. The program encourages them to use the money they save on groceries to work their way out of poverty. It also helps them set and work toward financial goals.

The service isn't a charity, nor is it a ministry, though Scriptures adorn some walls at 17780 N.E. San Rafael St., and the couple say their work is inspired by their faith.

Families accepted into the program pay a monthly service fee of \$35, which makes up most of the service's \$240,000 a year in operating expenses. The program also receives about \$25,000 a year in private donations, some from program graduates.

Birch Community Services is launching its first fund-raiser, aimed at getting \$4 million to build or acquire a new warehouse and double the number of families it serves. Since 1992, the organization has helped 2,000 families. But the program has outgrown its rented 18,000-square-foot warehouse, through which 4-1/2 tons of food passes each year.

"They do phenomenal work helping families deal with their finances and eventually weaning families from the program," said Mike Maksimowicz, executive director of the Portland Rescue Mission, who is helping with the campaign.

The service's warehouse looks like a grocery store. Its clean-swept aisles are neatly stocked with canned goods. Coolers are filled with meat, milk and other dairy products.

Barry Birch cultivates relationships with 40 Portland-area businesses, mostly wholesale food distributors, grocery stores and specialty food markets that donate the goods the program gives away.

Danner Shoe Manufacturing donates returned work boots. Jesse Gentle, owner of Gentle Shoe Shop, 10945 N.E. Halsey St., volunteers to repair the boots.

"These are \$200 work boots," Gentle said. "They're the kind of boot some people need to go to work."

Some clothes and some over-the-counter medicine also are available.

Suzanne Birch, 51, stocks the shelves with help from one full-time and one part-time employee and about 400 volunteers. She posts little notes on every shelf and cooler door that say how many items families may take. If families take the number of products allowed, they will fill their shopping carts.

Families must be nominated for the program by someone already in it.

"We don't ask about income," Barry Birch said. "They may make good money, but they made bad choices."

Most participants have debt, usually from medical bills or job loss. Many families have had one or more breadwinners laid off. Many work for minimum wage or piece together two part-time jobs to get by.

The program has 125 families on a waiting list hoping for a participant, such as Carmen Jones, 40, of Tigard, to graduate. Jones came to the program six years ago when her husband was unexpectedly laid off a short time after she had quit her job to care for her seriously ill son.

"The day Suzanne called, I was looking at my little checkbook wondering how we were going to afford things," Jones said.

Now her husband is back at work, and her part-time job has become full time. Jones came to the warehouse recently to bid a tearful goodbye.

"We hope they walk away with more than just food," Suzanne Birch said. "We hope they walk away with skills, with friends, with hope."

A decade ago Egbert Kunrath, the Birches' friend and insurance agent, helped them formalize the program, which at the time was serving 50 people from a 400-square-foot garage. Now Kunrath is chairman of the board.

Birch Community Services is ready to double in size and build or acquire a 35,000-square-foot warehouse, Kunrath said. The new building will contain classrooms so the program can expand its personal finance classes and a kitchen so it can add nutrition and cooking classes.

"The need is getting bigger," Kunrath said. "(Clients) make too much money to qualify for government assistance but too little to make ends meet."

Suzanne Birch said the most important focus of the organization is helping families. She especially worries about the strain on marriages when money is tight.

Last month, she put the new album by Portland's Pink Martini on the warehouse's sound system. While it was playing, a client who used to teach dancing started calling out dances that went with the songs. Suzanne Birch was inspired to organize a Saturday night dance in the center of the warehouse.

Two weeks ago, volunteers pushed bread racks against the walls, lit candles and set out the fanciest cakes from the donated desserts. A baby sitter watched the children of 15 couples for free in the next room, and the former dance instructor taught the parents how to swing dance and foxtrot under warehouse lights. One couple said it was their first night out in three years.

"It's only 10 percent about food," Suzanne Birch said. "It's mostly about people."