


# OUTLOOK

## Birch Community Services helps working poor make ends meet

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Participants must give back in order to receive



by: OUTLOOK PHOTO: JIM CLARK - Ray Keen, development manager for Birch Community Services

When Brian Williams of NBC News reported on Birch Community Services in September 2011, he began the segment with words, “In order to get, you also have to give.”

That’s the philosophy behind the Gresham nonprofit organization that, despite the national attention, is unknown to many locals. But for 22 years, Birch Community Services (BCS) has served the working poor, providing about \$600 worth of products each month to every participating family.

Just last year, BCS moved 7.1 million pounds of goods, mostly food, valued at more than \$10 million, through its 22,500-square-foot warehouse, and it was all given away.

But there’s a catch. Participants must pay \$60 per month to belong to the service, take a financial management class, and give two to four hours each month as a volunteer.

That monthly fees pay most of the overhead for the warehouse, and volunteers keep it running, said BCS development manager Ray Keen.

“It couldn’t work without help from volunteers, and last year they gave 33,000 hours of service,” he said.

Even though BCS has been operating “under the radar” for more than 20 years, Keen said founders Barry and Suzanne Birch would like to see more community support and encourage individuals and businesses to get involved through volunteerism, donations and financial support so they can expand their program.

The organization is hosting a “Breakfast with Birch” at 7:15 a.m. Thursday, April 17, and the community is invited. For details, including the location, call Keen at 971-235-2868 or send an email to [ray@birchcommunityservices.org](mailto:ray@birchcommunityservices.org) .

In addition to food and other goods, BCS offers adult education classes and workshops that include budgeting, financial planning, job search, computer skills, cooking, couponing and nutrition classes.

And all participants are required to attend a free financial seminar that helps them learn how to manage their finances and control spending.

“We encourage families to be self-sufficient,” Keen said. “The goal is to get back on the right track and headed in the right direction through accountability and responsibility.”

The BCS program is geared toward working poor families, not necessarily toward those who have emergency food needs and is not designed for people who receive food stamps or most other government assistance.

"There's a difference in emergency needs versus someone who is working their way forward," Keen said.

Entrance in the program is by referral from current or former participants, he said. That method helps BCS identify families that have need and would be good candidates for the program.

That’s how Dan Forrest learned about BCS, through someone who was already using the service. Forrest works for the city of Gresham’s sewer department and was doing fine until his son Noah got accepted to the University of Portland.

Noah, 20, was valedictorian of his Sandy High School class two years ago and wants to be a surgeon. In spite of scholarships, the private school costs the Forrest family \$20,000 per year.

“He got accepted to a really nice college and he deserved to go there, but it just about put us in the poor house,” Forrest said.

As the family struggled to make ends meet, a friend of Forrest’s wife told her about BCS. Forrest didn’t think they would qualify, but found they were prime candidates because in spite of rising debt and the state of the economy, he kept paying his bills.

“People who lived around us stopped making their house payments, but we wanted to keep paying our bills,” he said. “But these people are getting rewarded for not making their payments. They would just go negligent, so the bank works with them to lower their payments. It’s not fair to people who keep up with their payments.”

A year after their son started college, Forrest and his wife separated and money got even tighter. Two months later, Forrest learned he had stage 4 melanoma and was told he had just weeks to live. New treatment and surgery are helping him win his cancer battle, he said, and his fellow employees at the city donated their own time so he didn’t have to use his long-term disability. He hopes to get back to work soon, he said.

Being part of BCS has lightened his load considerably, Forrest said, and has helped his family survive college bills and his cancer.

“I pay my bills, but there’s no money left at the end of the month,” he said. “But you have to live within your means.”

About 60 local businesses donate regularly to BCS, including Starbucks, Fred Meyer, Costco, Franz Bakery, Georgia Pacific, Olive Garden, Sunshine Dairy and Pacific Seafood.

Another regular contributor is the Danner Shoe Company, which donates sturdy work boots that can retail for hundreds of dollars per pair, Keen said.

“Danner Boots has already donated thousands of pairs of boots,” Keen said, all of which have been rejected for retail sale for one reason or another.

“Some are returns or some might have a stitch not in the right place,” he said.

Keen said BCS “moves a lot of boots every year,” often to construction and warehouse workers who need them for their jobs or to get a job in the first place.

The average stay for a family in the BCS program is 38 months, Keen said, and the savings they realize from using BCS services can mean a 26 percent reduction in their monthly debt, money they can use to pay off credit cards, pay medical bills or just keep their heads above water.

But despite recent cuts to the food stamp program, Keen says people who need emergency food would be better off going to SnowCap Community Charities or another food pantry.

Barry and Suzanne Birch, the BCS founders, met at church, where they both started going after being dissatisfied with decisions they made earlier in their lives.

By age 40, Barry Birch said, he had lost everything and was reduced to looking for food in trash bins. So he started going to church, found God, and three years after meeting Suzanne, the couple married in 1986.

They both wanted to give back to their community, he said, "to be good stewards," and after someone left a bag of day-old bread on their porch for them to distribute, they decided to start BCS.

They later moved to a bigger distribution location and have been in their warehouse on Northeast San Rafael Street for 12 years.

"I had no interest in ever doing anything like this," Barry Birch said. "We had made a lot of mistakes in our lives and decided to surrender our lives to God."

Birch Community Services is a happy place. Although their belief in a higher power sustains and guides the Birches, they do not push their beliefs onto their participants and believe in "the dignity of the exchange" where people aren't made to feel they are getting a handout, but taking part in a program that gives them a hand up.

"We hold our participants accountable," Birch said. "They get \$640 worth of products and they can use the savings for whatever they need. Then they can graduate and give it to another family on the waiting list."

People who are accepted into the BCS program don't have to wait long, he said, usually only a few weeks or a month, and many stay to volunteer after they've "graduated."

"It's the funnest job in the world," Birch said. "We get free stuff and we give it away."