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Birch Community Services

By Shirley Hancock

Contributing Writer

At age 40, Barry Birch—a former Columbia Edgewater Golf Club member and wealthy salesman—was rummaging through dumpsters for food. He found the mother lode behind a Fairview grocery. “The first time, I found thirty-five fresh loaves of bread, still warm,” said Birch. “Later I found chicken, cantaloupe, and milk, and I kept going back.”

Birch had just lost everything—his sales job, home, wife and a relationship with his two daughters. “I got caught,” said Birch. “I led a very selfish lifestyle—adultery, addictions, alcoholism, and I got caught. There were times when I seriously considered taking my own life.” That was 1983.



photo by Aubrie LeGault

Birch is still rummaging, only now it's through a deep Rolodex of donors to Birch Community Services, an innovative nonprofit he and his wife, Suzanne, co-founded in 1992. Both were divorced, "couponing and plowing out of debt" when they married, nearly thirty years ago. When a friend arranged for a Union Gospel Mission truck to deliver excess bread to the Birch household, the Birches consumed what they needed and gave the rest to struggling families in their neighborhood. The more they gave away, the more the food came. "Pretty soon we had produce stains all over our seat covers—and ants. We had to move bread when we had company so we could sit down," Suzanne Birch said, laughing.

The friend urged them to incorporate and Birch Community Services was born. It is Oregon's second largest food redistributor (behind the Oregon Food Bank), annually serving more than 930 working poor families.



photo by Aubrie LeGault

Birch Community Services is located just off I-84, in Gresham. Think Costco, only smaller, with an indoor children's play area. Members push their carts through a 22,500-square-foot warehouse filled with fresh, dried and frozen foods.

Barry has taken late-night calls from truckers who've had to drop lavish loads: 127 pallets of chocolate drizzled popcorn, 7,000 pounds of halibut, 60,000 pounds of prime rib, and 3,500 pounds of French Roast Starbucks coffee.

Members also have access to free clothing, shoes and classes in nutrition, gluten-free cooking, Chicken 101 (egg raising), QuickBooks and résumé writing, to name a few.



photo by Aubrie LeGault

One single mom, Brenda, said she no longer worries about food. “I’m owed forty thousand dollars in child support,” she said. “Coming here solidifies the foundation with my children and lets me pay my other bills.”

The Birch model of “Responsibility and Accountability” is springing up all over the country, including California, New York, New Jersey and Louisiana.



photo by Aubrie LeGault

Members cannot be on government assistance. A monthly sixty dollar service fee covers warehouse rent and overhead. One family member must volunteer two to four hours a month, and all members attend six weeks of financial training.



photo by Aubrie LeGault

“This place saved my life,” said Brenda. Barry Birch agreed. It saved his, too.