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[Nonprofit Spotlight: Birch Community Services](#)

Birch Community Services gives away food and asks for life-change in return



Client-volunteers sort food at Birch Community Services. (Birch Community Services)

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By Claire Sykes

At a warehouse on the edge of Portland, Oregon, low-income shoppers fill large yellow carts with produce, canned goods, frozen meat, and pastries. They can also pick up household items, clothing, and work boots at this 23-year-old nonprofit, the second-largest redistributor of food and other goods in Oregon. The staff at Birch Community Services, however, make one thing clear to their working-poor clients: This is no handout.

In an unusual twist, Birch participants agree to use the money they would have spent on groceries and clothes to pay down debt and build up savings, further their education, or upgrade job skills. They must meet regularly with a financial planner and take classes at Birch to make sure they set and reach these goals. There are also optional classes on computer skills, cooking, gardening, and searching for a job. More than 900 families participated in Birch in 2014.

Personal responsibility and accountability are big here. To remain in the program, every month participants pay a \$60 fee and volunteer two to four hours at Birch. “We talk about it as the dignity of exchange,” says development director Ray Keen. “A family who gives back doesn’t feel like they have to check their dignity at the door when they come for food. They’re part of the solution.”

Universal volunteering also fuels a strong sense of community. “The provision of food and household goods is secondary to the extended friendships that have resulted, as we have seen God provide for the working poor,” says Suzanne Birch, executive director and co-founder with her husband, the late Barry Birch.

There was a time Barry never expected to live past 40. His history of alcoholism and broken relationships left him dumpster-diving for food and contemplating suicide. But he started going to church and found God, and also Suzanne. Together they started making better choices, and three years later they married. In 1992, a friend at the local Union Gospel Mission delivered a batch of bread to the Birches’ porch. They gave what they didn’t need to two single moms in the neighborhood. Their generosity blossomed and eventually grew into Birch Community Services.

In 2014, Birch received donations from 150 community partners at its 22,500-square-foot warehouse, and the organization distributed 8.1 million pounds of food and other necessities. Groceries come nearly expired or barely bruised from Costco, Starbucks, and other local retailers, and from Birch’s two volunteer-run teaching gardens. Having access to these donations allows an average family to offset about \$9,000 of expenses per year.

“We were living month to month,” says Amber Smart, a mother of two teens and part-time church administrative assistant. “If not for Birch, my husband wouldn’t have been able to change his career to become an electrician. We were also able to save for a new roof and to replace my car.”

Smart and other Birch participants are referred by current or past participants or by Dress for Success Oregon, a Portland organization that helps low-income women re-enter the workforce. Participants must attest to financial fragility and be employed or seeking work. After an average of 37 months, graduates of the program increase their emergency savings by 98 percent and reduce monthly debt payments by 28 percent—all as a result of generous donors and participants’ perseverance, rather than dependency on aid.

Like its participants, Birch as an organization strives for self-sufficiency and sustainability. “We want to model what it looks like to be financially responsible,” says Keen. “Our debt is lean.” So are the organization’s expenses. In 2014, 36,000 volunteer hours equaled the work of 17 full-time employees, complementing its staff of ten. Birch has never received government funding. Monthly fees and revenues pay for about 70 percent of its operating expenses; donations and philanthropy cover the rest.

Birch received its first grant from the Collins Foundation in 2003, \$20,000 to help with staff expansion. The M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust became Birch’s strongest champion. Its gift of \$50,500 in 2011 paid for a refrigerated truck to transport perishable food, and it later gave \$162,000 over three years for a development director position. The Autzen Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, and Rose E. Tucker Charitable Trust are also supporters.

Since 2014, Birch has helped instruct nonprofits from other communities on how they might start similar programs, which have come to fruition in six states. Birch aims to grow that number of sites, and to double its operating capacity. It also hopes to expand its education and mentoring efforts so that the average stay in the program is reduced to 24 months.