

United Good Neighbors marks 65 years of giving, growing in JeffCo

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A worried society anxiously awaited the release of a vaccine to combat a devastating disease. The vicious murder of a Black man spawned nationwide shock and began a new chapter in the civil rights movement. Seemingly futuristic technology was being introduced to everyday life.

Yes, 1955 seems strangely familiar.

But although polio has since given way to coronavirus, Emmett Till to George Floyd (among, sadly, many others) and today's virtual assistants and smart cars make microwaves and TV remotes look downright Amish, at least one thing from the year Disney unveiled the first Tomorrowland remains the same today: 65 years later, United Good Neighbors of Jefferson County is still hard at work marshaling the support of the community for those who need it most.

It's a tradition in especially high demand these days, according to director Siobhan Canty.

"It was very modest at the beginning," she said. "I think the first year raised maybe \$8,000 — which was actually quite significant back then."

A collaborative effort between the chamber of commerce, Port Townsend Paper Corporation, and The Leader gave rise to that initial effort.

"The Leader played an integral role in helping to found it," Canty said. "It was the mill, the chamber, and the newspaper, they got together and started this."

A charity born from a business might seem incongruous to the more cynical among us, but Canty insists it's not so strange a phenomena, in JeffCo at least.

"The mill was very involved with the city and the growth of the city generally and recognized that a lot of people throughout the county were not getting the services that they needed in terms of food, shelter, job training, just basic human needs," she said. "So they thought, as their kind of responsibility, as the primary employer in our community, to be involved in more charitable efforts."

"It's kind of reflective of what I think has always been a culture of generosity in our community and those folks who have and who are in good shape financially just making sure those who are struggling a little bit more have the support they need," Canty added. "And I don't know of any other year in these last 65 when that's more important than this year."

The rise of COVID-19, Canty said, saw "extraordinary increases" in local unemployment rates, increased isolation,



Olympic Angels seeks to have every child in the foster care system supported by a Love Box group and every youth supported by a Dare to Dream mentor. Photo courtesy of Olympic Angels



Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County has put almost 60 families in affordable homes built by volunteers and funded by donors. Photo courtesy of Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County

especially among older members of the community, and financial hardships and emotional pressures galore.

"Just so many in our community are struggling," she said. "It really

makes sense for United Good Neighbors to be doing this work of making sure that safety net of services is stronger than ever."

The program is one of nearly 50 charitable groups and

efforts hosted by the Jefferson Community Foundation. Founded in 2005 by a small group of members, it has since grown to almost \$2.5 million in assets and this year officials expect to administer more

than \$1 million in grants.

"We're basically like an engine, an administrator for charitable efforts," Canty explained.

Perhaps UGN's most iconic campaign, the annual Give Jefferson fundraiser, going on through Thursday, Dec. 31, has been slightly adjusted so as to reflect the unique current situation in Jefferson County and abroad this year, Canty said.

The timeline has been shortened, she explained, so the outcome can be maximized.

"We got a lot feedback that it went on too long," Canty said. "We're hopeful that by being more concentrated in our efforts we can reach more people in a more efficient way."

Donations to the Give Jefferson campaign support frontline efforts that deliver food, shelter, healthcare, education, and hope to those most in need in Jefferson County, including restaurant and hospitality workers, retail and customer service staff, skilled laborers, tradespeople, farmers and public agency and government employees.

This year, officials noted, local donations will be matched by "All in WA," a statewide relief effort supporting workers and families impacted by COVID-19.

It is, Canty said, a more precise approach than earlier, more frantic efforts.

"The COVID response and recovery fund that was being run by Jefferson Community Foundation was running through July and [that] was really focused on new efforts to save programs and meet emergent needs as they were happening in the early stages of the pandemic," Canty said.

"Whereas, the UGN campaign, Give Jefferson, is really focused on general operating core support for those frontline organizations because we know they are going to have to survive this as well."

Donors can choose to contribute to the general Give Jefferson fund (the most popular option), which allows officials to ensure all recipients are as fully funded as possible, or they can specify which partner to which they'd like their support directed.

Inclusion among the choices is a kind of stamp of approval, and donors can be confident in the quality of the groups and efforts they support through Give Jefferson, Canty said.

"We have what we call a community outreach team, made of all volunteer community members, who go through each one of the applications, undertake a site visit in normal years — this year that was undertaken by phone — but they do the research on it, just

see **UNITED**, Page B4

See inside for special section on United Good Neighbors Give Jefferson

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GIVE JEFFERSON



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Hot meals ready for pickup, thanks to the YMCA. Photo courtesy of YMCA

Coronavirus increases need for greater food security

JANE STEBBINS
SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

Food insecurity in Jefferson County was challenging enough before COVID.

But the community has stepped up, with donations of time, food, and money to help those who can't go back to work yet, seniors living off small Social Security checks, and families, many of which have never envisioned such a situation.

A GENEROUS COMMUNITY

"We have a very giving community," said Deisy Bach of the Jefferson County Food Bank Association, the umbrella organization for the four food banks. "They really step up to help everyone else."

"And kudos to our volunteers; we could not do this if we didn't have their commitment."

It's been a challenge for all — growers, distributors, food banks and volunteers — but it's working.

Bob McDaniel and his wife provide food for kids and seniors through the Weekend Nutrition Program in Brinnon and Quilcene.

When COVID hit, the number of

families needing assistance jumped from 50 to 80.

"Brinnon (schools) went nuts," he said. "They were up to 59 — and we only have 88 kids in the grammar school."

The couple stocks up on food during sales: Costco had a sale on soup; they bought everything the store had.

"But as winter comes, those sales usually end, and costs shoot up," McDaniel said.

He relies on the community and grants to buy food.

"We have quite a bit of food insecurity here," he admitted. "There's not very many jobs; if you don't work with the schools or the county, who else are you going to work for?"

The food bank association has banks in the Tri-Area, Chimacum, Port Townsend, and Quilcene and Brinnon, feeding 800 families a week, Bach said.

"You have a middle class, retirees who have some money, locals, and a lot of homelessness," Bach said. "In Quilcene (and Brinnon), about 40 percent are seniors on Social Security. We have a lot of families where one spouse might be on permanent disability; a lot of single moms. We have a lot of need."

All the food organizations knew demand would increase when COVID took hold. But they didn't have contingency plans for other expenses.

"We had to get canopies and heaters for outside," Bach said.

"And a good percentage of our volunteers are in need themselves. They can't afford \$30, \$50 on a rain jacket — they were using garbage bags."

As in many communities, seniors comprise the bulk of the volunteers — and are the most vulnerable population.

They disappeared. Others were afraid to wait in line for food.

The food banks are all drive-through now. That, however, has resulted in an increase in volunteer work hours, as they have to package and deliver boxes of food to those registered to receive it.

Volunteer ranks have started to fill again, Bach said, adding that until there is a proven vaccine, she anticipates operations will remain like this until fall of 2021.

"It's just a tough year," she said. "I can't wait til it's over."

see **FOOD**, Page B5

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Photo by Andrew Wiese

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United: Annual charity drive makes a difference

continued from Page B1

make sure the money is going where they say it's going to go and that there is real impact happening and then they can be added to the campaign.”

Visit www.givejefferson.org to learn more, view a complete list of eligible recipients, and donate.

Questions can be submitted through the “Contact Us” section of the website, directed to Canty specifically via siobhan@jcfives.org, or by phone at 360-385-1729.

This year, several amplification efforts are also happening in addition to the

larger donation matching, creative ways for donors to maximize their impact such as #MatchItMonday, wherein every person who donates online on Mondays will be entered to win prizes from UGN’s business partners and an additional \$100 to donate to Give Jefferson however they choose, and #GiveLoveGiveWednesday, wherein the Give Jefferson partner that has the highest number of donors on Wednesdays will win an additional \$100.

The need, Canty said, is greater than many might think — no matter how great they think it is.

“I don’t think that folks

can overestimate the number of people who are using these services,” she said. “Many times they are people we interact with everyday — who are working in our grocery stores and our banks and our government and at our school.”

“Always, there are more people struggling to get by in our community than we’re aware of,” she added. “There are groups of veterans living in their cars in ‘car communities’ in the woods in the Tri-Area; there are young people who don’t want to take their backpack home because their parents are using drugs and will sell them and use the money to buy drugs; there are increasing numbers of domestic violence activities and limited services, in south county particularly.”

Those shocked by such revelations are likely

experiencing the downside of living in a comparatively privileged area, Canty said.

“We hear the term ‘living in a bubble’ — ‘Oh, I live in a bubble here in Jefferson County or Port Townsend.’ And actually that’s not always a great thing when the people among us really do need support.”

In a world where so much seems out of the control of average people, Canty said organizations like United Good Neighbors, and the Give Jefferson fund in particular, can instill a sense of community and consistency — yesterday, today and 65 years from now.

“Making sure these front-line organizations make it through the next 12 months is one of the most important things we can do as a community,” she said.

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SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS:








Food: Nonprofits expand to meet increasing need

continued from Page B3

TIME TO EXPAND

Foodbank Food and Gardens was lucky this year, said president Kathy Ryan.

The organization grew 8,400 pounds of produce in its seven gardens last year — and next year, will increase that dramatically, ironically, thanks to COVID.

When the pandemic hit, there was a small decrease in those needing food because SNAP benefits and the federal stimulus checks enabled people to buy food. People took to their gardens and donated produce. Gleaners came through at the end of the season. Hoop gardens were built to grow food through the winter.

All plan to expand. Birchville Garden, at 900 square feet, plans to expand to 2 acres next year.

“Gardeners are considered essential workers,” Ryan said. “It keeps people going. It’s a form of socializing with social distancing. It’s win-win.”

YMCA SEES COVID IMPACT

The YMCA staff and volunteers had a huge learning curve in March, said Wendy Bart.

In 2018, 23 percent of families in Jefferson County experienced food insecurity. By 2019, that jumped to 34 percent.

“You can only imagine what the impact (going to be) in 2020,” she said. “And we realized in the summer, the kids who needed food the most were those who had the least access to a food location.”

“It was crazy,” Bart said. “But it was the right thing to do. We said, ‘We’re going to step up and figure it out.’”

In a typical summer, the YMCA serves Grab-n-Go meals five days a week and volunteers compile weekend



Summer meals from the YMCA are gathered, ready for those in need. Photo courtesy of YMCA



Food bank workers stand COVID-safe and ready to go. Courtesy photo

“backpacks” with breakfasts, lunches and dinners.

Enter COVID. Volunteers worked with the school kitchen staff and bus drivers to deliver meals to bus stops in the spring. When schools closed in June, YMCA volunteers delivered food to individual homes.

Last summer, they served about 130 meals a week. This summer: 2,000.

By the end of summer, YMCA volunteers had packaged and delivered 29,000 meals.

School kitchen staff are making lunches again and delivering some via the bus system to those learning remotely.

Backpacks are back in operation, too.

“There’s been a lot to learn,” Bart admitted.

that food.

“That’s a way to make a big dent in food insecurity,” Bart said. “There’s so much passion around supporting access to food, we just have to find a way to coalesce resources.”

“Overlaps and collaboration is really really special,” Ryan said. “It’s a big picture with a lot of moving parts.”

COVID has been a learning opportunity for everyone, Bart said.

“We learned about people who need the most and how important it is getting it to them,” she said. “And we saw how we could mobilize in the middle of an emergency. Now we know what to do in the event of another.”

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Rental assistance: Concerns will continue in the coming months

JANE STEBBINS
SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul of East Jefferson County provides money for emergency situations, typically helping 20 to 25 families a week pay rent, mortgages and utility bills.

And since the COVID pandemic began, not only have the number of requests for assistance almost doubled, so has the average financial contribution to help them out.

In light of the economic recession we're now in, St. Vincent has also had to broaden its definition of "emergency," said president John Cantlon, who has worked for 13 years alongside others at the

faith-based nonprofit in Port Townsend.

"If you can't pay your rent, that's obviously an emergency," he said.

"If you can't pay your utilities, that's obviously an emergency. But what if you're driving to work and your tires are showing tread through the tread — the tires become an emergency."

Another example is cell-phone minutes, which was debated among the members for a while. They ultimately decided minutes would qualify, because not having any minutes on a phone could further disenfranchise people — most of whom are the working poor, Cantlon said.

About two-thirds of the nonprofit's annual budget is

provided by the congregation of St. Mary, Star of the Sea Catholic Church. St. Vincent used to distribute about \$100 per family on its \$2,000 weekly budget. But since COVID debuted, it was running out of money within days.

Through donations and grants, however, the organization has been able to increase the amount of money it gives to people — on average \$250 — particularly those whose debt is snowballing and threatening to put them on the streets.

"A lot of people work constantly," Cantlon said. "But they don't make enough money (to pay a full bill), so they pay as much as they can in the spring to catch the bill up. But this spring, all the jobs went away."

The under-the-table economy has dried up, as well.

"The general casualty is odd jobs, side jobs, to pay for that little extra in people's lives," he said. "It's just not there. Artists, musicians are starving to death. There's no lessons, no gigs."

A JCF grant of \$67,500 and another from FEMA for \$12,800 helped them with that problem.

"Without that money ..." he said. "And the parishioners keep up, writing grants."

He admitted he is "absolutely" scared about the coming winter. The statewide rent moratorium extends to the end of the year. And utility bills will definitely increase.

"There will be an increase in homelessness," Cantlon said. "There's not any kind of adequate solution."

He is not without hope. "Most of the people in the faith-based community all read the same book, and in that book, Jesus Christ, over and over and over again, tells us it is our responsibility to help people in need," Cantlon said.

"So we try to live up to that just like every other faith-based group in Jefferson County. We'll just continue doing what we do: serving the people who need help."

HELP FOR IMMIGRANTS

It's one thing to get rental assistance funds to people



Volunteers and supporters of Jefferson County Immigrant Rights Advocates gather for a photo at a recent Rhododendron Festival Grand Parade. Photo courtesy of Jefferson County Immigrant Rights Advocates

who need them, but when those people are immigrants, it sometimes borders on impossible.

"There's a lot of fear in the immigration community — and justifiably so," said Jean Walat, co-chair of Jefferson County Immigrant Rights Advocates (JCIRA). "They've been told by many people that if they take any public money, they will not have the opportunity to become a citizen."

We mostly work with people in the North Olympic Peninsula. When society went into lockdown, the folks who usually work in the shadows of the U.S. economy came out of the woodwork seeking help with their everyday expenses.

Funds are also used to help immigrants get legal assistance, a now-online ESL class, and provide help with immigration applications, DACA and the citizenship process. JCIRA has also obtained host homes for two asylum seekers while they wait for their case to be processed.

Right now, it's daily living expenses: rent, electricity, gas money.

"What was small before COVID that has become huge, is (requests for) legal assistance and family support," Walat said.

"We gave out less than \$15,000 before (COVID). And we had 20 applications — total, before mid-March — and that went to 70 in one week after COVID."

They were ready, Walat said.

"It really was incredible for us," she said. "We had the fund in place, the

policies in place, the volunteers were there, we were eligible for funds and knew where they would go; we were ready."

Donations came from the Jefferson Community Foundation, about 600 on JCIRA's mailing list and a GoFundMe social media page.

"People stepped up," Walat said. "We're lucky to live in a community where people have money and are willing to share it with other people. That's really made the difference."

It was needed.

"The most requests were from people in essential services or in jobs with no benefits: restaurant workers, housekeepers, caretakers, salal workers for the floral industry. They just shut down, totally. A lot on the west side (of the county) didn't have any job prospects. They really needed help with rent."

"So many people were cut out of the stimulus money and are essential workers," she added. "Or they work in the gig economy and don't get benefits."

In all of 2019, when the fund was substantially smaller, JCIRA distributed a little more than \$10,000 to help families with rent.

Since COVID brought the economy to a screeching halt, that expenditure has leaped to \$180,000.

"We'll keep going as long as we can," Walat said.

"We hope between the two funds and what people continue to give, that we'll be able to keep up with demand. We just have to see."



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Nonprofits find COVID creates another hurdle in push for more affordable housing

JANE STEBBINS
SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

The worldwide pandemic put a damper on construction for Habitat for Humanity — even forcing them to cancel their application cycle that attracted a record 50 families — but work is ongoing.

“We felt we had no choice,” said Jamie Maciejewski, executive director of the nonprofit. “And we also had no way to figure out how many (homes) we would be building. We’re still building, but at a much slower rate.”

Over the years, Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County has put almost 60 families in affordable homes built by volunteers and funded by donors. Habitat families are also required to put in a certain amount of sweat equity to qualify for lower mortgage payments.

“More than half of all adults say they have made at least one trade-off in order to cover their rent or mortgage,” Habitat officials said. “Such trade-offs might include taking second jobs, cutting back on health care and healthy food, and moving to less safe neighborhoods.”

Habitat works with families to acquire skills and financial education necessary to be successful homeowners. Families can then seize the opportunity and possibility that decent, affordable housing represents.

Knowing that, the volunteers hammering, painting, roofing and planting anticipate finishing three homes by June 30, 2021, but that’s half of what was originally planned, Maciejewski said.

And demand is up. “We are seeing people move to the area to escape the city, people who now can work from home in any community,” she said. “This is bound to make housing more difficult. We are very worried about that.”

In August, Habitat had to repurchase a home they’d built last year — and then had trouble finding a family to buy it. But a special recruitment effort that month resulted in 10 applicants, many of whom were living in “the most serious housing issues we’ve seen in a long time,” she said. “Things like no plumbing and kitchen facilities. We could have accepted more applicants if we had the homes for them.”

JEFFERSON INTERFAITH ACTION COALITION

The Jefferson Interfaith Action Coalition started its work addressing immigration issues — and soon found itself involved in a warming center project.

For the past two years, they have operated such a center on Sims Way, but when COVID struck, they were forced to close in early March, said Elisabeth Heiner.



Bayside Housing and Services offers transitional, temporary housing adjacent to the Old Alcohol Plant in Port Hadlock. Guests pay 30 percent of their income for rent. Photo courtesy of Bayside Housing and Services

At the time, they were providing warmth, snacks and Wi-Fi to an average of 14 people a day served by an employee/monitor and a volunteer.

“It was a very narrow space,” she said, “and our volunteers were a vulnerable group.”

On Oct. 21, they obtained city approval to relocate to the Pope Marine Building on Water Street — and renamed the project the Winter Welcoming Center.

The money they save will enable them to hire two employees to monitor the space. The goal is to get people out of the cold so they don’t get sick — and in rare cases, die. COVID has added a new dimension to the challenge.

Heiner said she didn’t know how many people the new facility will accommodate, but masks will be required, food and coffee won’t be served, and people must social-distance. Heiner said they plan to again be open seven days a week for four hours during the day.

Some details are in flux, such as how people who live in tents at the entrance to town will get downtown.

“It’s a lot to work through, to make sure everyone’s really safe, that we’re following guidelines,” Heiner said.

“But I am hopeful something good will come out of it, if nothing more, we start to work together a little better. Look out for one another a little more.”

Like so many other organizations helping the community, Heiner expressed her appreciation for the support of the endeavor.

“The compassion and understanding,” she said. “Businesses have been so kind. Such good neighbors.”

BAYSIDE HOUSING AND SERVICES

Bayside Housing and Services offers transitional, temporary housing for individuals and families who are without a home or in an

unsafe housing situation.

The Port Hadlock-based nonprofit also offers employment and training to some guests, enabling them to take new skills to employment elsewhere; the goal is to help them find social and economic independence, said Greer Gates.

“One of the most important aspects Bayside offers is personalized case management and guest assistance,” she said. “We’ve assisted residents in obtaining their drivers licenses and social security cards, as well as apply for long-term housing and various jobs.”

Demand has increased substantially since COVID came on the scene.

“We’ve seen a drastic increase in the requests for help and housing,” Greer said. “We recently hit triple digits on our waiting list, which has never happened in five years of operation. And it grows each day.”

Housing is located next door to the Old Alcohol Plant in Port Hadlock, where guests pay 30 percent of their income for rent, regardless how much or little they make. If they have no income, they pay nothing.

That generates about \$25,000 a year, and expenses are almost 10 times that, according to Old Alcohol Plant owner Gary Keister.

Almost 13 percent of Jefferson County residents are considered low-income,

eviction moratorium is lifted at the end of the year.

“Once these people are evicted, they still owe the back rent and most likely will be turned over to collectors,” Gates said.

“This is where the issue becomes critical. Once they’re in the credit bureau system as being delinquent or not paying their rent, they will for years not be able to qualify for housing, as all apartment owners and managers check applicants’ credit reports.”

The pandemic and

ensuing economic crisis has emphasized the critical role that housing plays in people’s lives, she noted, with the inability to pay rent or make mortgage payments potentially becoming a life or death issue.

“The pandemic has resulted in serious consequences for those with the fewest resources,” Gates said. “It affects all our community, and the failure to come to grips with the complexity only increases the problem and postpones an appropriate result.”

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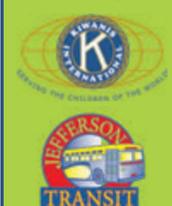
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Teens involved with the Community Boat project gather for a group photo next to one of their creations.



The Community Boat Project is a hands-on learning project for teens, who work under the guidance of adult instructors and volunteers. Photos courtesy of the Community Boat Project

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Stepping up to help JeffCo youth

JANE STEBBINS
SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

The pandemic has made the world a lonelier place, and it's even worse if you don't have internet access.

When schools shut down in March, many families here didn't have computers for kids to attend Zoom classes, so schools distributed laptops. Others didn't have bandwidth for numerous family members to be on the internet simultaneously — if they had the internet at all.

CONNECTED STUDENTS INITIATIVE

That's where Ben Bauermeister stepped in.

He's the head of Connected Students Initiative, a program of Stronger Towns, and works with schools and local internet providers to get them into virtual classrooms.

"If a kid says he has no internet, we can fix that," he said. "Someone else says, 'I can get that kid some care, teach advanced chemistry, get a hotspot or a mask.'"

There are hotspots throughout each town, including libraries and schools.

"Everyone knew there was a social inequity with internet access for students," Bauermeister said. "When COVID hit, schools had to respond, and a brighter light was shone on this program. In most cases, we're able to get a solution into the homes."

It's only one part of the equation, he admitted.

"My safety net is small and covers one thing," Bauermeister said. "This broadens that safety net. That's how a community responds."

THE BENJI PROJECT

The Benji Project tries to help kids with feelings of isolation, said development and operations coordinator April Thompson.

The program, founded after a teen suicide in 2017, teaches mindfulness and self-compassion tools to about 700 sixth-, ninth- and 12th-graders.

"Our vision is young people thriving as they navigate life's ups and downs," she said. "At each of these stages, they need to build their coping 'tool kit' so they can navigate life challenges more successfully."

It's needed. Even before the pandemic, Jefferson County's numbers were alarming, she said.

In a Healthy Youth Survey of 10th graders, 36 had made plans to commit suicide, double the state average. The

survey said 17 percent had attempted suicide, and 51 percent said they were depressed.

"Our community has struggled for years, and this is amplified by the pandemic and its restrictions on how we interact," Thompson said.

SKILLMATION STEPS UP

Skillmation, another Stronger Towns program, links students and young entrepreneurs with people with unique skills.

The main program involves ninth-graders and volunteer mentors who introduce kids to their fields of expertise. The program's premise is that community members have an array of experiences, but sharing them is difficult.

"I was wowed every time I went to an event and talked with people about what they'd done with their lives, and I wanted young people to have access to all of it," said co-founder Martha Trolin.

"It's about taking the skills and brain power of the community and building bridges between young people in schools and entrepreneurs."

Interaction is needed during the pandemic to keep kids engaged and interacting with others.

"I like connecting the amazing educated community with our youth," said volunteer Doug Ross.

"The kids light up — and the mentors become so animated. There's this connection between generations that's not normally there," he said.

COMMUNITY BOAT PROJECT

This hands-on learning program, based in Port Hadlock, partners teens with adult mentors to learn age-old and new building skills, while teaching critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration along the way.

In partnership with Puget Sound Voyaging Society, the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding, school districts, WorkSource, youth probation, and Bayside Housing, teens learn how to make boats — and sail or row on their 24- to 35-foot creations for days at a time.

"Interacting with the instructors and volunteers exposes these youths to adults who are passionate about their craft," the group noted. "This passion ignites in youth a desire to learn. It teaches teens how to respect and interact with adults. It makes inroads into careers and the community."

OLYMPIC ANGELS

Ian Hanna knows it takes a village to raise a child.

The president of Olympic Angels oversees a group of volunteers who support kids and families in the foster care system. Dissatisfied with many outcomes of the system, they found their model in the Austin Angels in Texas, which provides "relationship consistency" to kids and support for the families.

"That is a desperately missing part of the equation," Hanna said.

"Are the kids staying in place? Are they graduating? What happens to them after they age out; the national statistics are pretty sobering. And full-family care — families are doing the hardest job in the world on behalf of society."

On average nationwide, foster kids bounce around seven times in two years, and half of foster care parents quit after a year, he said. Getting perfect matches for both is critical.

Olympic Angels recruits, vets, trains and matches a group of volunteers for this Love Box program — he calls them his army of advocates — and links them with families.

"Parents tell us, 'This placement would not have stayed put if we hadn't had a Love Box around us,'" Hanna said. "Others with dozens of years of foster experience say this is the first time they've felt the support of the community at their back."

In Jefferson County, the Angels serve about 150 kids and requests for assistance from families skyrocketed during the pandemic.

The resources are there.

"So many good things are out there for kids from hard places," he said. "I feel this is the keystone that brings it together. None of it matters if you don't have an advocate who really cares about you."

A second program is Dare to Dream, which provides mentorship for teens about to age out of the system. Here, they are taught skills to live independently: landing a job and housing, or getting a driver's license.

"So many fall through the cracks," he said. "Go to downtown Seattle, look at the homeless situation, and you're looking at foster care. Go to any prison and you are looking at foster care. We want to change the projection for the better."

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