



Fern Johnson, Mary Salter and Linda Schneider in front of Second Hand Rose thrift shop in Bingen, a participant in the Washington Gorge Action Programs. Fern owns the shop. Mary is president of the WGAP board and Linda is the executive director.

Delivering the Basics

Gorge Action Programs serve many area residents who need the help

By Jeanie Senior

Linda Schneider, executive director of the human services Agency Washington Gorge Action Programs (WGAP), says she has a great job.

“But it keeps you humble,” she admits.

The 42-year-old agency is headquartered in Bingen, with offices in Goldendale and Stevenson and food banks at all three locations. It provides a variety of services to people in need in Klickitat and Skamania counties.

In Klickitat County, that’s a fair-sized segment of the population. In

1999, 17 percent of the county’s residents had incomes below the federal poverty level, well above the Washington state poverty rate of 10.6 percent.

“You always have a very clear perspective on how fortunate you are,” says Linda, who has been executive director for four years. “You always know that when you go home at night. You just think, I am so lucky.”

Mary Salter, president of the WGAP board of directors, says Linda “carries her commitment to mankind throughout all of what she does. She can hold the line, but she’s very compassionate. She’s a hard-working person who sets the pace for the whole agency. Everybody works pretty hard, because when you’re dealing with public funding, you don’t get enough for what you want to do.”

WGAP provides what Mary calls basic needs for people—food, shelter, heat—and now, clothing at

rock-bottom prices, for sale at the agency’s Second Hand Rose thrift shop in Bingen.

Mary says many people “are just barely making it.”

“Often it’s mental health issues, sometimes it’s chemicals, sometimes they’re just down on their luck,” she explains. “Add to that the higher prices for everything from gas to food to housing, and people living on limited incomes are struggling.”

The agency can gauge its accomplishments and the need with specific numbers. For example, more than 13,000 food boxes were distributed by food banks in Bingen, Goldendale and Stevenson. The count at the Bingen food bank jumped from 460 food boxes in September 2006 to 545 last September.

A partial list of other 2006 WGAP services includes operating a shelter and transitional housing—providing temporary housing for 75 people, including 22 children. The

agency weatherized 30 homes, and repaired and rehabilitated seven homes. It responded to almost 2,400 contacts from victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

The agency facilitates Klickitat PUD's Operation Warmheart program, which last year provided \$16,202 to help people with winter energy bills. Last year, 440 people were enrolled in WGAP's energy assistance program.

WGAP also operates a Youth Center in Bingen, and two years ago opened Second Hand Rose. Stocked with donations, it sells clothing, household items and furnitures. Prices are low—kids clothing and shoes are 50 cents to \$1, adult clothing is \$1 to \$2, coats and jackets are \$3 to \$5—with the aim of creating a place where people can afford to shop.

Donations, sales and the number of shoppers, who come from Hood River and Klickitat County, continue to increase, Linda says.

"We needed something like this here," she says.

The shop has one employee, Manager Fern Johnson. Mary works there two days a week, an example of WGAP's involved board. Another board member, David Duncombe, is busy with handyman work on WGAP properties.

Linda, who calls housing "a huge issue," is seeking ways and means to further address the problem. She says because of the real estate boom in the Columbia Gorge, rental prices are high "and people are moving out, not because they can't find jobs but because they can't afford the housing. It's an ongoing thing."

The agency has transitional housing and a shelter, which is often full. The only vacancies are usually in the summer, when it's easier to sleep outdoors.

The agency's operating budget has grown from more than \$1 million a few years ago to about \$2.3 million now, commensurate with the number of programs offered.



WGAP Executive Director Linda Schneider, left, packs boxes at the food bank along with Christine Heiskanen from Klickitat and Donell Lawrence from Bingen.

Linda, a successful grant writer, says "We take funding from anybody that will give us money; the federal, state and county governments, foundations. We'll apply for and accept money from everyone. We're very fortunate in that we have been able to secure a lot of grants, but our problem is that there never seem to be enough resources to really help the people in need."

She says WGAP distributes more food boxes than ever, but the boxes contain fewer items than they once did, because of the dwindling amounts of commodity and donated food. Once, the contents of a food box were reckoned to hold enough for a week. Now, it's enough for about three days.

"Just your basic food, nothing fancy," she says, gesturing toward a cardboard box with a dozen eggs, a bag of potatoes, a squash and a package of frozen turkey in gravy.

Grant money usually is allocated by population, not accounting for the vast geographic area WGAP serves.

"We always receive the smallest amount of money in the state, but we have a huge geographic area," says Linda, adding "when I think about large areas like Seattle, if somebody needs a food box, there's the Salvation Army, Northwest Harvest, churches. They can go here and there.

"In our area, if someone in

Goldendale needs a food box, there's only one place for them to go. That's the part of the allocation formula that's missing, but I don't want to whine."

WGAP was started in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

"His thought was that local people could more readily identify local problems and deal with them, rather than having the money go to the states," Linda says.

Agreeing with that philosophy, she left the Washington state employment office 20 years ago to take a job with the agency.

"I was really tired of having to follow rules and implement programs when all the decisions were made at the state level," Linda says. "They all seemed to be for the urban area, not really addressing the issues we have in rural areas."

The challenges some people face, and which WGAP works to surmount "keep you very humble," Linda says. ■

The Washington Gorge Action Programs Board of Directors includes President Mary K. Salter, Dallesport; Vice President Darlene Dickson, Stevenson; Secretary-Treasurer Roger Gadway, White Salmon; David Duncombe and Steve White, White Salmon; Cheryl Steindorf, Klickitat; Tammy Manner, Debi Van Camp and Nancy Perry, Stevenson.