



Secret Volunteers Energize the Community

From concerts to crosswalks, small group gets things done in White Salmon

By Drew Myron

Celynn VanDeventer is a whirl of ideas and action.

From the center of White Salmon's main street, she assesses the wear of the white salmon symbols painted on every downtown crosswalk, explains the genesis of a 100-foot-long salmon mural on a nearby fence, and strategizes for a summer of concerts, festivals and more.

"I don't sit still very well," she says, with a full and inviting laugh.

With this energy, Celynn (pronounced cee-lin) helped create Community Partners—a group working to boost the cultural and economic vitality of the town of 2,235 people on the western end of Klickitat County.

The group is comprised of four core members—a graphic designer, geologist, property manager and home inspector—and a handful of on-call helpers who get things done.

"No meetings. No paid memberships. All volunteer. And we don't spend much

money," says Celynn, an artist and entrepreneur who has lived in White Salmon for 40 years.

Though not a registered nonprofit organization, Community Partners operates in much the same manner.

"All our efforts and funds go toward community improvements," she says.

Art, Events and More

Founded in 2010—and fueled by Lloyd DeKay, Steve Gibson, Bill Werst and Celynn—the group is the driving force behind nearly every community event, such as the annual Fourth of July Parade and Concert, Art & Wine Fusion festival, summer concerts in the park, community Halloween celebration, Christmas tree lighting and more.

With art as their mark, evidence of Community Partners is everywhere.

The small town boasts colorful murals, bountiful planter beds, decorative street banners, painted crosswalks, creative bike

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racks and unique signage.

In fact, when visiting White Salmon, you cannot miss the set of brightly painted windsurf boards “planted” in wine barrels. The unusual welcome is a playful nod to the popular watersport that has helped revive the region.

“Our motto is ‘Let’s get things done,’” says Lloyd, the group’s president. “If the town is successful, we’re all successful.”

Dave Poucher, mayor of White Salmon, can hardly believe the city’s good fortune.

“They’re fantastic!” he says. “They really take the lead in making things happen in the city that the budget just doesn’t allow. We’re a small town and we flat-out just don’t have the resources to do those nice things. It’s been just a real blessing.”

Dave estimates the partners donate more than 2,000 hours a year to the community.

“They weed and water the planting beds, paint the entire town with salmon, organize the Christmas tree lighting and hang over 200 ornaments—and they even clean up,” Dave says.

No Spotlight Required

Because the volunteers seek improvement rather than glory, Community Partners is not burdened with tussles over spotlight or turf.

“They work well with other organizations,” Dave says, noting teamwork with the White Salmon Arts Council, Mount Adams Chamber of Commerce and city staff. “We’ve got a great group of people who want to do things.”



Above and opposite page, Celynn VanDeventer is part of Community Partners—a small group that works to revive White Salmon. Community Partners are responsible for a variety of projects ranging from annual celebrations to decorative art projects.

Lloyd, a geologist who moved to the Gorge in 2007, appreciates the acknowledgement, but is quick to minimize the attention.

“It’s really gratifying to do these things not for the title, recognition or attention, but just to get things done,” he says.

Celynn agrees.

“For a long time, no one knew who was doing these things,” she says. “We were the secret elves hanging ornaments in the trees.”

In fact, Community Partners’ most visible effort was, until recently, their best-kept secret: decorating Dock Grade Road for the holidays. The nearly one-mile stretch features a graceful canopy of trees ideal for hanging holiday ornaments. Now in its fifth year, the display features nearly 200 Christmas balls.

Lloyd says the community support is awesome.

Making a Comeback

More than just creating a pretty town with fun events, Community Partners aims to boost the local economy.

Celynn recalls the booming 1980s,

when White Salmon and nearby Bingen were lined with shops selling shoes, clothes, furniture and even cars.

With the demise of logging, the robust atmosphere dwindled. Business slowed, while across the bridge, Hood River revved up as a windsurfing and shopping destination.

But the work of Community Partners is turning things around, Celynn says. Last year’s Art & Wine Fusion festival featured 17 wineries, 40 vendors and drew more than 3,000 guests.

“Slowly, White Salmon is starting to come back,” she says.

Volunteers are heartened.

“It’s very rewarding to see a shift in the perception of area residents and visitors,” says Steve. “It now appears that what was once a smaller, less favorable town to visit is now the small walkable town to enjoy and gain a real grip on small-town living high above the mighty scenic Columbia River here in the Gorge.” ■

For more information, or to volunteer, visit www.wscommunitypartners.org.