

Caring and Commitment in Action

Assistance League of Bend reaches out to touch the lives of many in need.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects / photos courtesy of Assistance League of Bend

If the number of charitable organizations in town is any indication, then the residents of Bend have big hearts for those less fortunate. From helping children and seniors in need to assisting the homeless, nonprofit organizations step in on many fronts to offer compassion and tangible support.

However, there is one nonprofit organization in Bend that reaches all these groups, but many locals aren't even aware that it exists. The Assistance League of Bend (AL Bend), with 140 members, has been going strong for nearly three decades and is a thriving local chapter of the national Assistance League.

"We tend to be the best-kept secret in Central Oregon," said Susan Emmons, the nonprofit's vice president of marketing. "But we touch almost every element of the vulnerable populations in Central Oregon."

Through its various programs, AL Bend served 6,560 adults and children in Deschutes County during its fiscal year 2015-2016. The Bend chapter is the third-largest of seven chapters in Oregon.

"You join for the programs, but you stay for the friends," said Emmons. "We care as much for each other as we do the community in which we serve. We are caring and commitment in action."

"People join primarily to make a difference in our community," said Gia Hartmeier, vice president of membership. "Our members enjoy a sense of belonging and teamwork. There is opportunity for personal growth and, since we have no paid staff, they are involved in the administrative process, including problem solving, decision making and objective setting."

"I feel that the time I devote to Assistance League is truly making an impact on local families," Hartmeier added. "It has provided the opportunity to continue learning new things and given me a sense of purpose. My time and effort is appreciated and the women I work with have become my closest friends."

Bend's chapter of the Assistance League began when a group of seven women gathered informally in October 1989. For the first four years, the women

worked on fulfilling the requirements needed to create a full-fledged chapter, including achieving a tax-exempt, nonprofit status. In 1993, AL Bend was officially chartered, becoming the 92nd chapter of the national organization.

The Bend chapter house, located at 210 SE Urania Lane, was purchased in the spring of 1993, and has undergone multiple renovations to grow and evolve along with the organization.

Though each AL chapter is its own entity and is lead by a local board of directors and committee members who are elected and appointed, there is also a national board of directors that oversees the organization as a whole and provides guidance to the individual chapters.

Operation School Bell, the national Assistance League's flagship philanthropy, began in 1991, and was initially established to provide clothing to middle school children. Since then, it has grown to include children in grades kindergarten through 12. Although every chapter participates in Operation School Bell, each has its own version of how the

Breakfast with Santa with Santa's Assistance League Elves (left to right) Patti Stewart, Susan Emmons, Kathy Barron, Chairman Cindy Rowley, Sally Murphy, Jane Leach with Santa and Mrs. Claus.



Past Operation School Bell Chairman Judy Uriz with past President Nancy Martin help twin girls shop for school clothing at the Redmond Walmart.





Sue Emmons assembles My Life Story Books, which AL Bend give to foster kids, distributed through CASA.

program works. In Bend, it addresses basic clothing needs for low-income, at-risk children throughout Central Oregon, and the program has grown in numbers every year. In 1994, 36 disadvantaged children were clothed. During the 2015-2016 school year, the program reached 2,000 children, and the goal for this school year is to outfit 2,500 kids.

Brittany Jones, a single mom with three young children, was introduced to Operation School Bell through her Family Access Network (FAN) advocate. FAN is a foundation that places advocates in schools to assist families in need, and Jones had made a video for the program. Her FAN advocate showed the video to Emmons, and the connection was made. Jones received her first \$80 Walmart voucher through Operation School Bell in 2015 for her daughter, and this year, she was given vouchers for both of her school-aged children. She was also invited to speak

at the annual Assistance League of Bend gala as an Operation School Bell recipient.

"It's amazing to me that all these people donate their time and resources to help others in need," she said. "It's really neat. I would like to put a thank you out there to the Assistance League, and to Susan (Emmons). She has helped me with other programs and events too, and has been a great help. She's almost like a grandmother to my children."

When Jones received her \$80 vouchers for her 6-year-old son, Irie, and her 8-year-old daughter, Marlee, she said she didn't tell them about it until right before it was time to go shopping.

"I knew they'd be very excited," she said. "When we got to Walmart, they were absolutely enthralled. My son was running around the store. He got a T-Rex glow-in-the-dark shirt that is his absolute favorite, and his Batman shirt is another favorite." She added,

"My daughter was excited because not only did she get the sweater dress she wanted, but she also got a shirt with a cat made of Legos on it. She just loves it. Her face lit up when she found that shirt because one of her friends has it too."

Over the years, AL Bend has adopted numerous other philanthropic programs, including Hats, Hats, Hats, These Kids are Cookin', Senior Caring, Secret Santa, Breakfast with Santa and Be There or Be Square.

- **HATS, HATS, HATS** provides knitted, crocheted and sewn hats for chemotherapy patients at St. Charles Cancer Center and Bend Memorial Clinic, for homeless individuals and for babies and preschool-aged children at Mountain Star Relief Nursery. Volunteers make and deliver the hats through various participating agencies.

- **THESE KIDS ARE COOKIN'** is a four-week after-school program for fourth- and fifth-grade students at selected schools with high numbers of low-income families. The program teaches students measuring, nutrition, how to read labels, manners, how to set a table, knife skills and other valuable information that they might not receive at home.

- **SENIOR CARING** is a program that provides hygiene items to seniors in need, many of whom are on Medicaid and living in local care facilities. Members collect a list of needs from the facilities, shop for the items and then deliver them.

- **THE SECRET SANTA** program provides these same seniors in need with Christmas and holiday gifts. The activity directors from the facilities provide AL Bend volunteers with the wish lists of residents who do not have family providing gifts for them. The gifts are delivered in mid-December in preparation for each facility's holiday party.

- **BREAKFAST WITH SANTA** is another popular program of AL Bend. In partnership with the Pine Tavern, Breakfast With Santa is provided at the restaurant for local foster families. The annual event takes place the first or second Sunday in December, and is open to the public as well as the foster families. All children receive a toy and an opportunity to sit on Santa's lap and have their picture taken. The children whose families pay for breakfast help to fund the breakfast for the foster families who do not pay.

- **BE THERE OR BE SQUARE** is a program that rewards school attendance at Bend's alternative high school, Marshall High. The AL Bend awards students quarterly who have had perfect attendance during the previous term. The awards are gift cards from Carl's Jr., provided by league member Renea Hutchings, owner of Carl's Junior restaurants in Bend and Redmond.

Middle school student shopping for boots at the Bend Walmart.



To pay for these charitable programs, the nonprofit receives many donations throughout the year and holds fundraisers. Its largest fundraiser of the year is its annual gala, which takes place in November. This year's gala, "Boots, Buckles & Bling," was emceed by longtime league supporter Bob Shaw of KTVZ News Channel 21, and featured well-known local auctioneer Dennis Turmon. The fundraising event, which raised more than \$83,000, included dinner, silent and live auctions, a lively fundraising "dessert dash," line dancing, raffle drawings and a touching Christmas tree lighting.

Other 2016-2017 fundraising activities of the Bend Assistance League include "Kitchen Kaleidoscope," "Bend Gear & Beer" and "Raise a Glass."

Preparing hats for Heaven Can Wait Run (left to right seated) Barbara Strei, former knitted hats chairman, and Carol Hastings; (left to right standing) Donna Crandall, Knitted Hats Chairman, and Chris Kentera.



Kitchen Kaleidoscope, which took place in June 2016, is a ticketed annual event that is a tour of homes in an upscale area with food, beer and wine sampling. Local artisan vendors create and serve samples, with proceeds from the tickets benefitting AL programs. This year's Kaleidoscope brought in almost \$31,000, the largest amount ever raised through the event.

Raise a Glass, a new AL Bend fundraiser, took place in August 2016 and was aimed at reaching the Redmond community, Emmons said. This event was a happy-hour-style gathering with a guest speaker and brought in about \$10,000.

In the spring, AL Bend will be the beneficiary of another new event called "Bend Gear & Beer."

Santa's Assistance League Elves delivering Secret Santa gifts to low-income seniors in care facilities in Bend and Redmond. (left to right) Lena Hartshorn, Helen Riser, Barbara Robison, Carole Klement and Shandy Charon.



The event is a trade show with 50 exhibitors and vendors demonstrating and selling active lifestyle gear, competitions, live music, activities for kids, food prepared by Bistro 28, as well as a beer garden selling local craft beers.

"Currently, our chapter has a lot of retired professionals who now have the time to use their talent and expertise to help those less fortunate," Hartmeier said. "We welcome volunteers in all stages of life, however." Recognizing that today's volunteers run the gamut and don't always have a lot of spare time to devote, Hartmeier said the league is working on developing more opportunities for those who want to be involved, but aren't yet able to join as regular members, such as working professionals and young moms.

"Our members are asked to participate in and support our philanthropic programs and fundraisers. There are no minimum service hour requirements, but they are encouraged to attend monthly meetings," she said. "They are required to support the mission of the chapter, pay annual dues and serve on a standing committee."

The Bend Assistance League will be hosting an informational brunch for prospective members in January. For more information about membership, email to info@assistanceleaguebend.com. For more information about the Assistance League, visit www.assistanceleaguebend.com. (See www.bendgearbeer.com for more information about the new Bend Gear & Beer event.)