



Above: Howard Schaible works on a wheelchair ramp for a client in the Brinnon area. The Bluebills say making homes more user-friendly for the disabled and elderly is the majority of what they do.

Submitted photos



Members Ed Berthaiume (on ladder) and Howard Schaible paint a house for an elderly woman.

The gift of independence

Boeing Bluebills help seniors stay home

By Avani Nadkarni

After long and successful careers at the Boeing Company, a group of Olympic Peninsula retirees say they don't work for paychecks anymore — they work for the feeling of camaraderie and satisfaction they get while helping others.

The group is one chapter of the Boeing Bluebills, who are named after one of the first planes Boeing worked on, and who strive to give back for as long as they are able.

The program strives to make homes safer and more comfortable for those peninsula residents who are elderly or disabled.

"We want to do something to help the less fortunate in the community," explained Michael Graham, who has been the president of the Olympic Peninsula chapter for two years.

The peninsula division, one of four in the Puget Sound region — the rest are in the greater Seattle area — was created nearly 10

years ago by a group of relocated retirees including current chairman emeritus Z. Jack Randall, and had only 14 volunteers. Since then the chapter, which is headquartered in Port Ludlow, has grown to about 150 members, half of whom are regularly active. Graham said since the Olympic Peninsula is limited in its numbers of former Boeing employees, they have amended their constitution a bit.

"A few years ago we decided to have associate members who didn't have to be Boeing retirees," he said. "The only requirement now is that you want to help."

Since the start of the group, said member Myron Vogt, they have purchased Christmas gifts for more than 300 women and children touched by domestic abuse, installed more than 500 grab bars and railings for disabled or elderly residents and contributed more than 45,000 volunteer hours to Olympic Peninsula communities — and that's just the beginning.

Graham added that the chapter has five main programs that they work through to help community members ranging from school-aged children to senior citizens. The programs team them up with other charitable organizations on the peninsula to assist those less fortunate.

"Our major thrust in the tri-county (Clallam, Jefferson and ▷

Right: A group of Olympic Peninsula Boeing Bluebills gathers in Port Ludlow for an Oktoberfest feast.

Photo by Avani Nadkarni

Below: Bluebill Myron Vogt fixes up a bike as part of the bicycle repair program. The used, unclaimed bikes are donated to the Bluebills from the Port Townsend Police Department.

Submitted photo



Kitsap) area is a program we call Independent Living,” Graham said.

The program strives to make homes safer and more comfortable for Olympic Peninsula residents who are elderly or disabled.

Graham said the clients, who usually are referred to the Bluebills by welfare agencies or health care providers, usually need their homes to be more user-friendly. The most common projects include building wheelchair ramps for easier access, installing grab bars and railings and performing minor home repairs.

“We want to keep people in their homes for as long as possible,” added Randall. “That’s the important thing.”

The Bluebills use their handyman skills not only for home repairs but also to fix up bicycles and medical equipment. For the

bicycle recycling program, the group repairs bikes that have been unclaimed and handed over by the Port Townsend Police Department or have been donated to the program. Graham explained that the Bluebills repair about 50 bikes per year before they are distributed to families through Olympic Community Action Programs.

Members of the group also collect gently used hospital equipment such as wheelchairs, walkers, crutches and beds and make any necessary repairs. The equipment then is distributed to those who need it through Catholic Community Services of Western Washington.

The Bluebills members say it is important to them to help the community’s children as well. The group teams up with World Vision, a relief organization, to participate in the School Supply Distribution program to provide supplies to schools that meet the requirement of having at least 70 percent of their students on the free lunch program.

After World Vision acquires surplus goods from office stores, they collect them and put them in a warehouse in Kent. The Bluebills collect the goods and bring them to the peninsula, make an inventory and then distribute lists of the items to nearly 40 local agencies in Clallam, Jefferson, Kitsap and Mason counties. The agencies work with the schools and the Bluebills deliver and distribute the goods to the classrooms.

“We’ve delivered hundreds of flatbed truck loads of supplies,” said member Chuck Sherred.

Quilcene School District administrators noted in a thank-you letter that the Bluebills’ efforts allowed them to utilize their money toward curriculum instead of supplies.

“All these items (that have been donated) are used daily in a school setting and your generosity allows the district to spend its limited funds on books and technology instead of these routine supply items,” reads the letter.

The members also team up with World Vision for their Gifts-in-Kind program, which obtains and distributes goods donated from area companies to various agencies around the three counties. Vogt explained that nearly 800 companies participate and it is the Bluebills’ job to make sure the items get from them to the eli- ▷



Bluebill Ken Winter helps a donator unload items so that members can repair and recycle them and redistribute them to the needy.

Submitted photo

gible organizations that distribute the goods to needy families.

Besides the main programs, members of the Bluebills volunteer with local charities. Sherrard explained that once a month several members assist the volunteers of the Chimacum Food Bank in unloading trucks full of nonperishables.

The members all agree that it is their partnering with established volunteer organizations that keeps the Bluebills running.

"We work with World Vision, OlyCAP, Olympic Area Agency on Aging, Catholic Community Services, food banks," said Graham. "These organizations are already doing a lot and we're just helping them help others."

The Bluebills agree that while volunteering is their main purpose, the camaraderie and friendship are what make it even more enjoyable. Along with all their charitable activities, the members carve out time for four major social events per year: They organize a spring party, a summer picnic, an Oktoberfest feast in the fall and a Christmas luncheon in December.

Even during these social gatherings, giving is never far from the members' minds — at the annual Christmas function donation boxes are placed on the tables and the Bluebills reach deep into their pockets. At the end, the funds are collected and go toward buying presents for about 40 Olympic Peninsula families.

"Various domestic violence and sexual assault agencies provide us with the ages of each client family member," Sherrard explained. "We buy and wrap gifts for each person in the family and deliver them

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to the agency.”

The gifts, Sherred said, are a mix of practical and fun.

“Last year each family got a \$20 gift certificate to Safeway,” he said. “But the kids also got age-appropriate toys and games.”

Each meeting generally features a speaker from another peninsula-area volunteer organization. At the 2007 Oktoberfest event, the Bluebills invited John

Braasch, the president of Voices for Veterans, to speak about his charity. Graham said they always are looking for new ways to lend a hand.

“Let us know if we can help you in any way,” Graham told Braasch at the dinner. “I’m sure we’ll have a handful of volunteers.”

Sherred added that many of the Bluebills also volunteer outside of the activities the organization puts together, because, as he puts it, once a giver always a giver.

“Volunteers are volunteers,” he said. “A lot of our members do other (volunteer) things as well. We realize that we have been lucky and we want to help others who haven’t been as lucky.” □



Member Ken Snider works on creating a reindeer for the Bluebills' Gifts-In-Kind program.

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