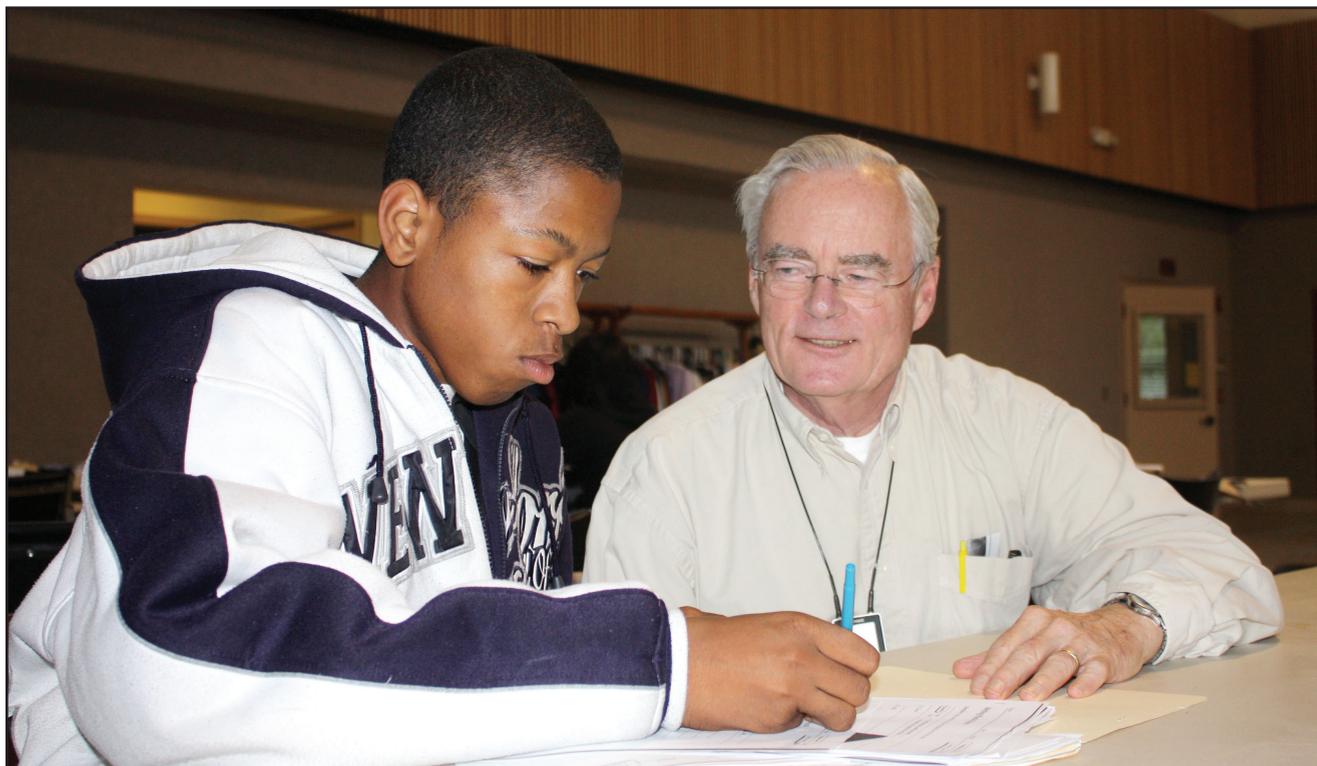


A Culture of Giving

Mariners and State of Washington salute volunteers

By Rebecca Hale



When retired Boeing engineer Phil Birkeland decided to become a volunteer tutor he thought he would be helping students with calculus and physics. He quickly found that wouldn't be the case. Instead, he learned he'd be working with high schoolers on elementary math skills.

"These kids don't have anyone at home who can help them with homework. There's no one who understands what the homework is for. They don't have the background that I had," said Birkeland.

So after years of donating money, Birkeland decided to become a volunteer and put his skills to use at Tacoma's Peace Community Center. There, Birkeland began working with teenagers facing a variety of challenges at home and at school. Eventually, he made a connection with one young man whom we'll call Daniel.

"When he started out, he couldn't tell time on an analog clock. The school basically abandoned him at grade two in math," said Birkeland.

Daniel had fallen in with gang members. One night, one of the boys he was with shoplifted, and police found marijuana in the car they were riding in. Daniel was sent to Remann Hall Juvenile Detention Center. Fearing he was headed for jail or worse, one of Daniel's relatives took him to Peace Community Center.

Birkeland spent time with Daniel, visited his grandparents, met with his teachers, he helped him understand the choices he was making were a dead end.

"I had to tell him basically, your mores and what you believe in become the same as what your friends are. With these friends, you're going to wind up in jail or dead, and I don't want to go to your funeral," said Birkeland.

Retired Boeing engineer Phil Birkeland puts his knowledge of math to use as a volunteer tutor at Tacoma's Peace Community Center.

After four years of tutoring, Daniel earned a high school diploma and Birkeland is now helping him learn the necessary skills to get his first job. It is a long way for someone school counselors had classified as severely learning-disabled.

"I classify him as a young man that anybody would be proud to know, including me," said Birkeland.

Birkeland was honored for his efforts with a Governor's Outstanding Volunteer Award. Last spring, he and fellow awards recipients were honored during a pregame ceremony at Safeco Field's annual Salute to Volunteers Night. This spring, on April 21, the Seattle

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Mariners and the Washington Commission for National and Community Service will once again join together to pay tribute to the men and women of our state who distinguish themselves through volunteer service.

“This annual event is an extension of the Mariners long-time commitment to the community. We take our responsibility very seriously and strive to make a positive and lasting impact on our community,” said Howard Lincoln, Mariners Chair & CEO.

Washington is ninth among all 50 states for volunteerism with more than 1.95 million volunteers contributing over 254 million hours of service each year.

“I think it’s part of the expectation of citizenship here in Washington state. We have a culture of giving and

I think that’s reflected in the individuals that volunteer,” said Debbie Schuffenhauer, Executive Director of Serve Washington.

Schuffenhauer says volunteering is contagious, and sometimes all it takes is an invitation. “The reason most people don’t volunteer is they haven’t been asked. So I think it’s really important for those of us that do volunteer to bring your children to a volunteer project or invite your neighbor or family member or friend to join you.”

That’s how Grace C. Hanson got involved at the Renton Activity Center.

“I was sitting outside under the awning visiting with the girls and someone came to me and said ‘I’ve got to leave, do you mind going in and taking care of the coffee bar?’ I didn’t know a thing about it, but I went in and I asked someone ‘how do I make coffee?’ and they told me, and then it

At 94 years of age, volunteer Grace C. Hanson spends six hours a day, five days a week running the Renton Senior Center coffee bar.

happened again the next day, and so I have been on ever since,” said Hanson.

That was more than a decade ago. Today, Hanson, at the age of 94, walks six blocks to and from the Senior Center five days a week to manage the coffee bar. Three days a week she also helps with lunch service. After a lifetime as a small business owner, a daycare center operator, even a stint as a riveter at Boeing during World War II, Hanson has earned her retirement. But she says she wouldn’t know what to do with herself if she wasn’t volunteering.

“I love it. I love every minute of it. I like the people. I joke a lot with the customers that come in, and there’s a lot that come in daily. I used to be able to call them by name, but now there are so many new ones, they come in in the morning and they say ‘good morning, Grace C.,’ and I just say ‘good morning.’”

On a recent rainy day, the Renton Senior Activity Center’s coffee shop was as busy as any neighborhood Starbucks, with chattering customers checking their iPhones.

“We have 100 people a day getting coffee. Grace gets a lot of the credit for the success. She runs a good program,” said Shawn Daly, the Center’s Recreation Supervisor. “We really count on her. We don’t want to take advantage of her, but she wants to work. It’s her life, and it keeps her going.”

For Serve Washington’s Debbie Schuffenhauer, the best volunteers are people like Grace C. who “have a desire to be connected to their community and be part of the solution.”

Schuffenhauer says volunteers can give as much or as little time as they’re able, and for some people, it becomes a regular part of their lives.

“You think you’re helping others, but you find you get so much more in return,” said Schuffenhauer.

If you are interested in volunteering but not sure where to start, log onto VolunteersofWashington.org to learn about projects in your community. Or visit information tables at Safeco Field during Salute to Volunteers Night on Monday, April 21.

Rebecca Hale is the Mariners director of Public Information.