

# QUINTESSENTIALS

*A close-up look at personalities who help make the Basin a great place to live*

## Assistance League of Klamath Basin — Operation School Bell

By SEAN BASSINGER  
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Most days of the year, the corner shop at the Fred Meyer building along Shasta Way appears to be empty.

But on Tuesday, Sept. 11, shoppers may have noticed something a bit different: A handful of volunteers and a golden retriever, Molly, occupied the space, sorting through school supplies, children's clothing and hygiene kits.

It was the beginning of Operation School Bell, a continued volunteer effort through Assistance League of Klamath Basin.

"That's what you see going on here right now," said Merlaine Zwartverwer, vice president of communications at the league who has worked with the group for several years.

Though only about a half dozen of them worked away, Linda Hartenberger wanted to make another point clear: this was just a sample of their continued group effort, which currently has more than 70 volunteer members.

Hartenberger serves as vice president of philanthropic programs with the group and has continued to help with the give back programs since her retirement.

"We have a great group of ladies and it's fun to work with them," she said. "You can use all your talents toward helping the community."

"And it's fun to work with the kids," she added.

### Finding a way

The Assistance League operates with just more than \$155,000 in total support and revenue,



H&N photo by Sean Bassinger

**Meeting needs, changing lives:** Behind the scenes working for Assistance League of Klamath Basin's Operation School Bell are Merlaine Zwartverwer, left, Linda Hartenberger, Donna Drucker, Sheri Wilson and Molly, the golden retriever.

which comes from donations throughout the community. For more than 30 years, the group, mostly women, has continued to offer new clothes for children, in addition to other items such as books to the school libraries.

The group also receives income from Findables, a thrift shop along East Main Street that Hartenberger said has "something for everybody." She also made note of several Oregon Tech students who come and go for furniture throughout the year.

Assistance League of Klamath Basin volunteers used to be individually assigned to specific

schools, but Hartenberger said it wasn't long before local needs required more from them.

Even today, children in poverty in Klamath County remains at a staggering 28 percent, which is 9 percent higher than Oregon's statewide average, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.

This is why Zwartverwer, who used to also head nursing programs for the Klamath County School District, continues the work she does with the others.

She even made mention of one specific case that touched

her: A younger girl whose mother had passed away and whose father was in jail especially stood out years back.

"She was living with her sister and her sister didn't have enough money to give her clothing," Zwartverwer recalled. "So this really helped her."

Goals to assist in such ways continue to bring the group together as more volunteers step up to the plate.

### Something new

Hartenberger also mentioned countless volunteers and the cooperation of Fred Meyer, which allows the group to use the unoccupied corner store. She was also quick to mention the work of Sheri Wilson and Donna Drucker.

More specifically, Drucker reflected on her own more recent experiences working with Brandon Powell, a physical education teacher at Stearns Elementary. Powell was also instrumental in getting Stearns certified as a Klamath Falls Blue Zones Project school.

More specifically, Drucker made mention of the "Mighty Milers" program, a new health initiative that rewards students for exercise.

"So kids aren't just given the shoes," Drucker said. "They have to earn them."

Meanwhile, the entire group continues its efforts throughout the year, with large in-store shopping days already held this month, and one upcoming on Oct. 4. The group also plans to host another children's shopping day as a make-up on Oct. 18.

Everyone agreed that the events were a sight to see. "It's kind of a win-win for everybody," Zwartverwer said.

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