Volunteering is a rare opportunity for connection; it’s never too late to get started

by JOEY JOHNSON / photo by JOSHUA HUSTON

Erin Fitzhenry is a mid-career software developer, wife, and mother to two busy elementary-school-age girls in Magnolia. You’d think that she couldn’t spare bandwidth for one more obligation. In fact, Fitzhenry regularly donates time to Seattle’s University Unitarian Church, as well as the Girl Scouts of Western Washington. For her, volunteering is a way to give to the community while receiving the benefit of meaningful connection. “We could live so much of our lives without interacting,” Fitzhenry says, referring to the technological conveniences that make the days of borrowing a cup of sugar or hand-delivering home-cooked meals to an ailing neighbor obsolete. “Volunteering is an intentional way to create situations where we have to develop relationships. These things don’t happen unless we make them happen.”

Volunteers are the muscle behind many crucial services that would not exist without unpaid help, and our city is no slouch. According to the federal agency Corporation for National and Community Service, Seattle’s...
volunteerism ranks eighth among major American cities – 38.1 percent of our residents donate 12 million hours of service yearly. To put that in perspective, the work that volunteers do here is estimated to be worth nearly $3 million.

Some of Seattle’s most important volunteering opportunities serve the unmet needs of financially challenged children and families. Here are some ways that people in our area are making a difference. You can, too!

Sharing time with students. Overall, Seattle schools receive tremendous volunteer support; unfortunately, that help is not evenly distributed. Out of 104 public schools here, 33 are considered Title I schools, which have high numbers of low-income students. “Some schools have up to 800 volunteers per year,” says Ania Beszterda-Alyson, volunteer services program administrator for Seattle Public Schools. “While Title I schools may have 20 or 25. That disparity represents the availability of volunteers’ time. “Schools with many volunteers are in neighborhoods with more white-collar jobs, which allow flexibility to take time off. Families in our Title I schools tend to have jobs that are strict around scheduling, and if you do take a day off, you don’t get paid.” Fortunately, Seattle school volunteers do not have to be parents or live near the school where they volunteer. “We love retired folks and people without children,” says Beszterda-Alyson. “They often have the most to give, and can be more flexible to volunteer where the need is greatest.”

Retired attorney Nancy McCoid lives in Eastlake and decided to volunteer at Rising Star Elementary (formerly Van Asselt Elementary) on South Beacon Hill. Rising Star’s diverse student population is 46 percent English-language learners, and they have a large need for one-on-one reading support. “Many of the students were born in another country or are first generation and being raised in their family’s native culture,” says McCoid. “I’m second-generation Irish Catholic, from a constricted background that didn’t necessarily allow for college, especially for girls. One student told me she wanted to be an airplane pilot, even though her mom said girls don’t do that. I told her that if she wanted to fly a plane, she needed to be able to read first. Another student was amazed that a retired lawyer would volunteer for free, and she became very interested in the idea of studying law.”

Supporting children and families in crisis. Molly Leonard of Maple Leaf first learned about Ladybug House (ladybughouse.org) around 2011, when she met founder and Seattle pediatric nurse Suzanne Gwynn. The unique startup nonprofit is focused on serving the end-of-life needs of children and their families, many of whom must travel to our area to receive medical care. “My stepfather died in hospice in 2000, and I helped my mom during his death,” says Leonard. “When I learned about Suzanne’s work with Ladybug House, I just felt drawn to it, even though I had never volunteered before.” A professional graphic designer, Leonard donated many hours developing the organization’s branding and distinctive logo.

There are currently only three pediatric palliative care centers in the United States. The vision of Ladybug House is to
Other important to-do’s in the New Year

Volunteering for an organization isn’t the only way to make a difference. These opportunities can happen at home:

- **Recycle right**
  China stopped accepting recyclables in late 2017 because our offerings were contaminated with food, liquids, and non-recyclable materials. Since then, new recyclers have started up and others have expanded operations. Today, most of Seattle’s recycling is processed right here in North America.

  To keep the cycle turning, however, it’s crucial to ban contaminants and non-recyclables from your blue bin. If you are in doubt, Seattle Public Utilities encourages people to use the “Where Does It Go” tool at seattle.gov/utilities/WhereDoesItGo.

  To make a difference by recycling right, follow these rules:
  - Everything must be empty, clean and dry
  - Keep food and liquids out
  - Focus on the five most-wanted recyclables: Paper, Cardboard, Glass bottles and jars, Plastic bottles, jugs, tubs and containers; Metal

- **Vote!**
  Let this article be the first one this election year to remind you just how important voting is. Yes, the Seattle area is mostly true-blue, but our state lags behind in getting all eligible people to register and turn in their ballots. In the 2018 presidential election, 76 percent of Washington’s voting-age population was registered to vote, and only 60 percent of that group actually cast a ballot.

  Voting is especially crucial to helping our many homeless neighbors. “After years of outreach and working directly with families we serve, we’ve learned the difference between people remaining housed, versus losing their housing, is about having support,” says Brittan Stockert, Babies of Homelessness executive director. “The best way to inspire action is to VOTE. Community members can become informed, demystify some of the misconceptions about homelessness, advocate against the backlash, and vote in favor of more affordable housing projects and support services.”

  Check your own registration status and see your voting history at voter.votewa.gov/WhereToVote.aspx.

shower supplies to recipients, interact with families, host baby showers, and write thank-yous to donors.

In addition to the organizations highlighted here, there are literally hundreds of volunteer positions in and around Seattle. Make 2020 the year you go out and find the situations that will build those important relationships that don’t yet exist, so you can both give and receive the power of real connection.