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Making a difference: Molly Leonard, left, is a graphic designer and longtime volunteer for Ladybug House. Suzanne Gwynn, right, is the founder of Ladybug House, a nonprofit hospice service for children.

Be the change in 2020

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

by **JOELY 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

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Seattle'sChild

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"Seattle is my town. I know this city inside and out... or so I thought until I had kids."

Seattle's Child is your guide to getting to know your city all over again. Finding things to do, places to eat, and how to get around — it's a whole new ballgame with kids in tow. We're interested in how parents make homes in a space-challenged urban environment, how families create community, and what parents are really talking about. Seattle's Child reflects real Washington families and their broad range of parenting experiences.

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You'd Cry Too "Toddler Conversation Starters" by Brett Hamil



"Wanna see how fast I can run?"

"Do you hab candy?"

"My mommy gots die-a-REE-yuh"

«What Parents Are Talking About

CONTINUED

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 at 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

build a home-like facility, with 12 suites where families can receive support and a place to rest. The facility will also provide the option for comfortable end-of-life medical care outside of the sterile, visiting-hours-only hospital environment. While they continue the search for a space, Gwynn and her team of volunteers focus on fundraising and “celebrating every day” through the Ladybug Love outreach program. “Our goal right now is to help one family per month,” says Gwynn, “by offering respite, help with rent or hotel costs, opportunities for recreation, and other support.” Volunteers are needed for website updating, video editing, making phone calls, data entry, event planning, and interviewing families.

Providing basic needs to unsheltered babies and kids. Michaela and her husband were happy to give birth to a beautiful baby girl. Upon being discharged, the hospital asked if they had a car seat for the baby, but not if they had a place to live. Michaela and her family went back to their van, where it was parked that summer in Kirkland. Returning to the hospital not long after to check the baby for heat-stroke, Michaela was threatened with a visit from Child Protective Services. Ashamed and afraid, Michaela reached out to Babies of Homelessness (*babiesofhomelessness.org*), a Bothell-based organization founded in 2016 that provides basic necessities — diapers, wipes, and formula — to young families experiencing homelessness. Her needs were met with compassion and support, and today the couple and their 20-month-old daughter live in permanent housing and Michaela’s husband is employed full time.

Brittan Stockert, Babies of Homelessness executive director, knows that solving homelessness is not easy. She believes, however, that providing clean diapers to babies who are living in encampments or cars, or bouncing from shelter to shelter, is an important way to start. It’s also important to note that Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards — formerly known as food stamps — can’t be used to buy diapers, even though they are crucial to a baby’s health.

“Sometimes we receive criticism for what we do, because we are not solving everything at once,” Stockert says. “However, research has shown a huge correlation between the diaper needs of low-income mothers and maternal depression. Diaper need, even more than a lack of food, is a stressor that leads to hardships and mental health struggles. So if we can alleviate this problem, we, and the community, can continue to work on the rest.”

Volunteers for Babies of Homelessness staff the 24-hour hotline (866-442-6443), package and deliver supplies to recipients, interact with families, host baby

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 2016 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.

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.

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