

‘A beautiful bridge’

WHETHER HELPING NEW ARRIVALS WITH ENGLISH OR LOCAL FAMILIES PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE, LAURIE PEEK HAS MADE AN ENRICHING LIFE THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

BY MARLENE FARRELL

It's a Tuesday evening, and Laurie Peek sits with Javier Lopez and Elena Rodriguez at a table in the Peshastin Dryden Elementary library.

Javier and Elena know this school, because their children attended here in the past. But tonight they are the students, and Laurie is the teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL). Although they could all be home with their families, they have chosen to take an hour and a half to converse in English.

They go over a worksheet that has pictures of various hobbies. Javier and Elena practice the dialogue, inserting swim, swam, or swum at the right spot. They speak words like “probably” and “difficult” perfectly, because they are similar to the Spanish words *probablemente* and *difficil*. Contractions like “I’ve” and “isn’t” are more challenging. Laurie reminds them of the correct pronunciation from time to time.

It's a lesson, but they chat in a relaxed way like friends. Laurie asks what would it be like to surf or figure skate, and the conversation flows, with little pauses when Elena or Javier searches for the right word.

This is the way Laurie lives her life, in a patient, thoughtful way, helping others.

When not at home with her daughter and three grandkids, she is busy in one of her many

work and volunteer roles, including interpreter with the school district and at the free medical clinic, assistant manager at both Jubilee, a non-profit fair trade store, and at the Community Cupboard non-profit thrift store and food bank, and teacher of ESL and citizenship classes.

Language brought Laurie to Leavenworth 40 years ago, and language has been one of the main reasons she's stayed. But that first language was French, for which she was hired to teach at Peshastin High School. She did that for two years.

The school then asked her if she could start a Spanish program, which would be useful given the growing Latino population in central Washington.

“I feel so grateful that they asked me,” Laurie said. It set her life on a new trajectory. She agreed even though she didn't know Spanish herself. Undaunted, she spent a summer in intensive Spanish classes at University of Washington, and her background in French made fluency in Spanish come more quickly.

While she didn't stay at the high school for long, Spanish opened many doors for Laurie. “Teaching Spanish is fun,” she said. She has taught at a former alternative school in Wenatchee but also informally in summer camps and for adults through a continuing education program.

These days she teaches ESL



Laurie Peek helps make up more than 250 monthly food boxes at Community Cupboard. Photos by Kevin Farrell

much more often than Spanish. A working knowledge of Spanish is not critical for ESL teachers. However, if a student knows little English, he needs a teacher like Laurie.

Spanish-speaking families with school-aged children also get to know Laurie. Interpreter is a limited description of her role for the past 20 years with Cascade School District.

Tim Lawless, the district's Special Services director and a former principal, said, “Laurie is like a beautiful bridge between

the school district and the second language learners. She is compassionate and professional. She has the trust of the Latino families.”

She interprets, but also visits families in their homes, building decade-long relationships as the children move through the school system.

Laurie is drawn to help where the need is greatest.

At the Community Cupboard she enjoys helping make up the over 250 monthly food boxes for local families. She smiles and

talks with the customers, listening to their needs.

“New people come into the Cupboard all the time,” she said, for food or other items. The regular customers know Laurie, just like the families she works with at the schools. The growing network of people who rely on Laurie is due to her years of service and respected reputation.

“Trust is not gained instantly,” she said. “I’ve known some people for many years before they told me their story, about how they got here and the sacrifices they have had to make.”

Laurie’s Spanish helped lead her to her other main passion, going to Guatemala, like a second home to her, and helping an ever widening circle of friends there.

She got to know Guatemala when she lived there for six months in 1999, volunteering at an afterschool program and at an orphanage.

The standard of living is low as the country is still in recovery from a 36-year civil war that ended in 1996.

Laurie said, “Guatemalans are generous and hopeful and value education as a way to improve the lives of their children.”

One friend of Laurie’s, Maria Tulia, first learned to read by scratching letters in the dirt. To cover the costs of room and board at her convent-run middle school, Maria Tulia worked 12-hour days and studied at night to keep up with her peers.

Only after the war’s end did she get to finish high school and go to college.

Her tenacity inspired Laurie. When Laurie found out that Maria Tulia had a niece and nephew who could not afford the tuition of private school (and given the poor state of public schools where teachers don’t show up because their pay is minimal), she helped link the children to sponsors in the U.S. to cover the tuition.

Those children, now grown, are succeeding. The niece is a registered nurse working toward



Laurie teaches students in an English as a second language class.

her master’s degree, and the nephew has finished a teaching degree.

Laurie realized the immediate and positive impact of these connections and has since set up many. She coordinates the sponsorships with assistants in Guatemala to get the needed funds to the families. Laurie said, “It’s probably more than 50 children that have been helped over 15 years.”

Every January Laurie returns to Guatemala, loaded down with two suitcases jammed full of clothes, shoes, medicine, toys, art supplies and books.

By the end of her trip the suitcases have been emptied into needy hands and then refilled with artisan craft goods that can be sold at Jubilee.

Laurie explained, “I usually have a list of about 90 people that I try to bring things for.” She goes to see the children, but she likes to give them something they could use but not necessarily afford.

Laurie admits that her life isn’t very balanced. Time for herself is found in slivers, in the early

mornings before her grandkids wake up, or when she goes for walks.

“My jobs and commitments are not stressful, so I look forward to them as a respite from the activity at home.” As for compensation, she said, “I don’t distinguish between paid work and volunteering. If you like what you’re doing and the people you’re interacting with, then it has value.”

There are hundreds of people in the upper valley and hundreds more in Guatemala who have been touched by Laurie’s efforts. She inspires others who work on these issues.

Alex Schmidt, who teaches ESL and citizenship classes with Laurie, said, “Her passion and compassion for those of our neighbors whom we perceive as “different” is commendable and life giving.”

But Laurie focuses on her own gratitude. “I have learned so much about immigration issues through my work. And it has opened my world up to friends and cultures that have enriched my life.”

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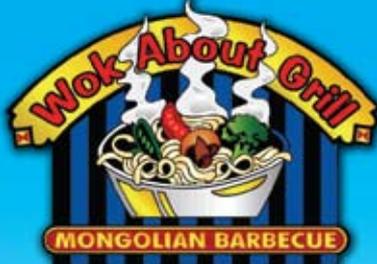


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