

Hardship, Success Define Program

Leslie Naramore takes the reins at Washington Gorge Action Programs

By Jeanie Senior

Leslie Naramore, Washington Gorge Action Programs executive director since the beginning of the year, laughs when asked if she has any changes in mind for the human services agency.

“I’m planning to give myself a year and a strong foundation before I institute any changes,” she says. “I’ll get my own footing and go from there.”

Leslie says she is aware of the strong legacy left by her predecessor, Linda Schneider, who led the agency for 29 years. When WGAP staff, board and community volunteers gave Linda a Wonder Woman costume at her retirement party, it was not altogether a joke.

“Linda is a pillar of the community, and she’s a fantastic person,” says Leslie, whose first job with the agency was a temporary post in the energy-assistance program. “Linda had a grand plan, and so I followed it. It feels like an honor to have been selected by her.”

Leslie, who grew up in Lyle, lives in White Salmon with her husband, Mikael, and their son, Quintus, 4. She is a graduate of Western Michigan



WGAP Executive Director Leslie Naramore explains how important her predecessor, Linda Schneider, was to the program.

University, where her studies emphasised social justice.

WGAP, rooted in President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, is in its 50th year of providing services to people

in need in Skamania and Klickitat counties. Programs include food banks in Bingen, Klickitat, Goldendale and Stevenson; housing and heating assistance, weatherization

and a youth center in White Salmon; and Programs for Peaceful Living, which assists crime victims and works to prevent domestic violence.

The agency has a 30-person



Left, Leslie and her son, Quintus, 4, tour the small greenhouse used to supply seedlings to clients. Right, Leslie and Lucy Andresen at Second Hand Rose.

staff and an annual budget of almost \$3 million, which comes from a wide variety of sources including federal, state and other grants, donations and earned income. Expenditures for food and housing account for about half of WGAP's expenses.

In the fall of 2015, the agency moved from east of Bingen into its new downtown headquarters. The move to the former Mansfield Hardware building greatly expanded the space for Second Hand Rose—WGAP's community-supported thrift store, offices, and the food bank.

"It's better overall for every program," Leslie says. "We're all together and it's better for clients."

The out-of-town location was difficult and dangerous for clients who had to walk there, she says.

Leslie attributes WGAP's successes to Linda.

"She was really good at getting people on board, getting people to believe in

something," Leslie says. "Just her presence—how long she'd been here—helped keep the agency healthy."

She also praises the volunteers who devote thousands of hours to agency programs.

"Volunteers are a huge part of everything that we do," Leslie says. "We wouldn't make it without volunteers. We have volunteers who work in our food banks, who work in the thrift store, who work at the Guided Path shelter grounds."

Others volunteer at the youth shelter and in Tom's Learning Garden at the west end of the WGAP building. Seedlings grown in the small greenhouse there are distributed at the food bank.

The need for WGAP programs remains. Although Klickitat County's poverty level dropped more than 4 percent—from 19.8 percent of residents in 2005-2009 to 15.6 percent in 2010-2014—28.2 percent of the county's children live in poverty.

Scott Bailey, regional labor

economist for the Washington State Employment Security Department, notes the rate is "well above the state and the nation."

The other dilemma in the county, with few real solutions in sight, is affordable housing.

"It is a huge problem," Leslie says. "Affordable housing is pretty much nonexistent."

With help from the county's affordable housing fund, WGAP recently bought a seven-unit apartment building in Goldendale. The Journey Home apartments will stay affordable, Leslie says, and she is thankful for that.

"We are always looking for something here in White Salmon and Bingen, but property prices are so high that the chance of doing more here is pretty low," she says.

WGAP operates an emergency shelter in Bingen for people who are or are about to become homeless. It has seven rooms—three for families, the rest for singles. Shelter residents can stay

from 30 to 90 days, during which time WGAP staff tries to help them with health care, mental health, employment and longer-term housing.

"It's always full," Leslie says. "I am not sure of the last time we had an opening."

"We see a lot of homeless people in the line of work that we're in. There's always the rumor that homeless people come from somewhere else. That's just not true. All of the homeless people we have come from right here in our community. They're living in cars, couch-surfing, or multi-generational families are forced to live together."

Fortunately, WGAP sees plenty of successes.

"It's so great to see clients going forward, doing things for themselves," Leslie says. "For me, it kind of comes full circle. When I was a kid, my dad came to the agency and worked with Linda. Under the Timber Reinvestment Act, he was able to go back to school." ■