

The Oregonian

Volunteer: 'He's not my project anymore; he's my friend now'

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You hear it again and again: A small experience can change your life.

Valerie Ebinger almost missed her small experience. She was supposed to go to a baby shower that day.

She'd arranged for a group of employees of CorSource, where she is human resources and office manager, to put in several hours of volunteer work at a Southeast Portland home.

Val had hooked up with Community Involvement for Entrepreneurs Foundation of the Northwest, which assists businesses that want to help their communities. The group had suggested that Rebuilding TogetherPortland, a nonprofit that supports low-income homeowners, could use help.

A week before the work date in April, Val got an e-mail from the Rebuilding Together project manager, Luis Trybom.

"He said, 'I want to give you a heads up, because this is a situation I've never encountered,' " Valerie says.

Luis wrote that the man whose home they'd been assigned had been there for 30 years, "and he's a hoarder of junk," Valerie says. "And he had an old wood-burning stove, so there was black soot everywhere."

The e-mail came with photos "showing decay and nastiness." Some volunteers dropped out -- which was OK, Valerie says.

Those who remained were told they would need to be compassionate. "To us it might look like junk," Valerie says, "but it was important to him."

Valerie decided she'd join the volunteers in the morning and go to the baby shower later. She never made the party.

Early that day volunteers met at a tiny house in Sellwood. "Luis gave a little pep talk for about 12 from my company, some of Luis' friends and a few others," Val says. It was 25 that first day, and they were nervous and tense.

The homeowner, who looked to Val to be in his 80s, walked out. "He was tall, thin, hunched over, wearing a bathrobe and scruffy-looking clothes, using a cane. He sits on his falling-apart steps and it's dead silent. I'll never forget: The first words out of his mouth were, 'I'm really scared.'"

"I realized, this is a person we're dealing with. It set the tone for the day. He stepped aside and we started."

The volunteers removed all the junk. They scrubbed walls and floors and painted. The man had little usable furniture -- he'd been sleeping on a sofa that fell apart as they carried it outside -- and almost no clothes. He had no running water in his kitchen. The walls were not insulated.

Most volunteers avoided the homeowner.

"But as the day went on, I'd say a couple words to him," Valerie says.

At the end of the day Valerie saw there was much more to be done. Still, "the feeling was incredible."

"One of our brainiac IT guys said, 'That was one of the best days of my life, and I don't even like people.' "

Valerie organized groups from CorSource to return the next two weekends. After that the group returned once a month. At their own expense, they brought furniture, clothing and blankets; repaired water lines; added lighting. At CorSource's expense, they replaced the living room flooring.

Valerie made it a point to talk to the man, who she was shocked to learn was only 64. "He told me about his life in bits and pieces."

His father had been abusive. He had serious health problems. "I can't tell you the despair. But the amazing thing about him, he never described himself as a victim."

She began doing his laundry. She began to gently scold him, so he'd pick up after himself.

"People were afraid to touch him, because he looked bad. Not filthy, but scary. I put my arm around him and said, 'We're here for you.'

She washed his hands and face with a warm washcloth. "He was just glowing, he was so happy."

The man left notes in his house, thanking them for their help. "It was awkward for him to say thank you, so he'd point to a piece of paper on the floor. It was sweet."

He loved to talk about cars and machinery -- what Valerie calls "old technology." She listened. "I started learning things from him."

When the man needed surgery, Valerie and Luis went to the hospital to provide support. When the man broke his hip, then had a house fire, then hurt his other hip, Valerie was there. Last July, she gave him his first birthday celebration "in I don't know how long."

And now, just when his house has become more livable, it's becoming clear he can't live there alone, Valerie says. "So I'm talking it through with him." The man may have to move to assisted living. If he does, Valerie will help him adjust.

Valerie believes she was meant to meet this man and work with the other volunteers who helped him.

"I've learned we're all just people, with the same needs. Some of us get them; some of us don't. I should be thankful for what I have.

"I've done projects and walked away. But he's ongoing. And he's not my project anymore; he's my friend now. No matter what happens to him, I will remember him for the rest of my life."

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