

Monday, February 7, 2022



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Former volunteer becomes senior center's new manager

Megan Stewart February 05 2022



Sarah Larison was named senior programming specialist and meal site coordinator in January.

When Sarah Larison walked into the Newberg Senior Center to fill out a volunteer application for Meals on Wheels, she had no way of knowing that in four years she would be running the place.

Last month, Larison became the Chehalem Park and Recreation Department's new senior programming specialist, as well as the Meals on Wheels meal site coordinator. She replaced Polly Tremaine, who is now retired. Tremaine's predecessor, Matthew Compton, is an administrative staff member and Larison's supervisor.

As part of her new position, Larison supervises the center, the volunteers running it and the center's many activities and events. However, as the senior center is not fully open due to the coronavirus pandemic, her primary role for now remains "getting people fed," Larison said. This entails ordering, checking and making sure the food is distributed on time.

Larison, who previously was a stay-at-home mom for six years, said the job "has been a change of pace" but that her volunteer experience at Meals on Wheels made the adjustment "fairly easy," as she was familiar with the expectations.



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Meals on Wheels volunteers, who operate out of the senior center's kitchen, package pre-made food and make daily deliveries to elderly people's homes.

COURTESY PHOTO: CPRD - Sarah Larison is the new senior programming specialist for the CPRD, as well as the Meals on Wheels meal site coordinator, in Newberg.

The local chapter of the organization serves 84 people every day and that number increased during the pandemic but has slowly decreased as "things have gotten better," she said.

In addition to delivering one meal a day, volunteer drivers conduct a wellness check and offer "a meal and a hello," as Larison put it.

Deliveries are especially important on holidays, Larison said, adding that almost everyone they serve requests a meal on Thanksgiving as visitors are infrequent.

"Seeing someone for a few minutes may be the only contact they get that day," Larison said.

When she was a volunteer, Larison drove the same route for four years and had formed close bonds with the people she served -- connections that made the transition to her new job difficult.

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However, before she left, Larison told her people that they could call the senior center anytime and request to talk with her. One woman on Larison's former route is an avid reader and calls to ask for specific books from the senior center library to be delivered along with her meal.

Overall, though, Larison is enjoying her new position.

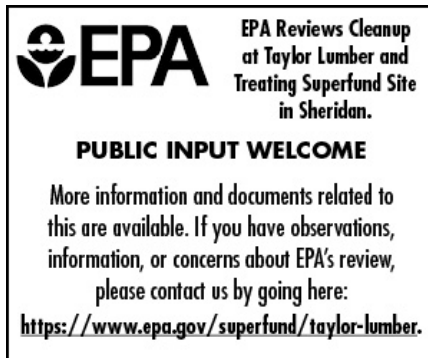
"I love all of the volunteers -- at the desk, in the kitchen and all of the drivers. Everyone has been so nice here," Larison said.

Larison became interested in the senior programming specialist position once Tremaine announced she would retire. After expressing her interest, Larison shadowed Tremaine to learn the ropes.

"When she (Tremaine) announced her retirement, I evaluated my life and realized it would be a cool job," Larison said, adding that since her daughter, Maggie, had started kindergarten this year, and her son, Rhone, was already in fourth grade, "the timing was kind of perfect."

Not only that, but Larison lives only a few houses away from the senior center and her children attend Antonia Crater Elementary.

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"I walk into work, they walk into school, and we all leave at the end of the day," Larison said.

Three years ago, her kids started helping Larison with Meals on Wheels and have since become enthusiastic staples of the senior center, developing their "own ownership of the place," she said.

"They help where they can in their best kid way," Larison said, adding that they buy practically everything for sale at the center, including jewelry and candy, which they purchase with their own money.



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Background

Originally from Texas, Larison once worked as a paramedic in Austin and taught courses related to her profession at Austin Community College as an associate professor. While there, she met her future husband, Ted, who had moved to Austin from Philomath.

After getting married and having her children, the couple moved their new family to Oregon. First stop was Lake Oswego, but the Larisons did not feel at home in the city and kept looking. They eventually found Newberg and fell in love with the small-town atmosphere.

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Larison said she was especially excited about the proximity of Crater Elementary to the senior center, which would allow her children to interact with older community members as they grew. As Larison later discovered, the layout of the two buildings was intentional.

She said she believes fostering intergenerational bonds is important because those connections lead to a stronger community and teach "children to care for people around them." In many cases, elderly folks are the most vulnerable in any community.

"If you want to raise your kids to be helpful citizens, they need to be familiar with the people who need the most help," Larison said.

Senior center's future

The senior center remains only partially open -- meaning room capacity is still limited and several favorite programs have not yet returned -- but there are still plenty of activities available. Among these activities are billiards, an arts and crafts gathering called Crafty Ladies, a China-painting program called China Painters, as well as games like Mahjong, dominos and bridge.

The foot clinic and library are also open. Additionally, the senior center provides coffee and weekly treats, including bread donations on Wednesdays and Fridays. Puzzles and magazine are available as well.

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When the center reopens fully, which Larison said will unfortunately not happen this year, her first objective will be to bring back established programs and activities seniors desperately miss, such as sit-down dining, exercise classes, Tai Chi, bingo and more.

Once the old staples return, Larison plans to ask people what new additions they would like to see and hopes to host joint activities for seniors and children when it's safe for the two age groups to mingle again. Some of her ideas include crafting, meals, storytime and more.

"They can bond over Legos and donuts," Larison said. "That's like their common language, I think."

Additionally, she hopes to eventually set up a Christmas concert for the kids to perform at the senior center.

To volunteer at the senior center or Meals on Wheels, stop by the center between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Meals on Wheels always accepts applications for volunteer drivers and kitchen assistants. Vacations are allowed.



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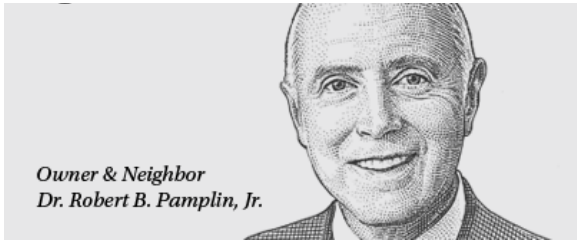
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