Linked families

Joan Cleary helps reconnect families through the Restoring Family Links program. She has worked five cases since joining the Red Cross including helping Boise-area families with connections to Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Program reconnects loved ones separated by crises

Joan Cleary has always loved travel and learning about other parts of the world. So when she discovered the opportunity to volunteer with the Red Cross Restoring Family Links program and help reconnect families separated by international crises including war, famine and disaster, she knew it was the right fit.

“When I was a kid, I used to send postcards from different countries—just made-up stuff based on high-lights from a world encyclopedia,” she said. “Restoring Family Links is sort of like that, but the stories are real.”

Each year the Restoring Family Links program reconnects thousands of people with their families including helping them acquire essential documents for reunification. After requests come in, Red Cross partners with sister Red Cross and Red Crescent societies around the world to locate missing loved ones including helping families living right here in Idaho and Montana deliver messages to families living right here in Idaho and Montana.

Joan, who lives in Boise, interviewed to join the Red Cross in February, a few weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, giving her an outlet of sorts to cope with the images she was seeing in the news.

SEE LINKING, PAGE 2

Four stars recognized

The Red Cross of Idaho, Montana and East Oregon recognized four fabulous volunteers recently at its annual board meetings.

Paul Ayers

The family of Paul Ayers accepted the Roy Eiguren Leadership Award on Paul’s behalf in July. A true Red Cross leader, Paul began volunteering with the organization in 2017, providing comfort and care following disasters like home fires and floods.

Paul Ayers

Paul Ayers was a disaster Action Team volunteer in Gallatin County, joining the team at age 90. Sue’s wife Joanne continues on volunteering with the Red Cross as a Disaster Action Team member and Pillow-Case Project assistant. Read more about Sue’s incredible life here.

SEE AWARDS, PAGE 3

Scott Willoughby

Scott Willoughby received the Dane Watkins Exceptional Volunteer Award in July, given to the Red Cross volunteer who logged the most hours in Idaho and East Oregon.

Scott joined the duty office program in 2019 and recently at its annual board meetings. He also completed the Red Cross Information and Planning Mastermind series this year and has deployed on two regional disaster responses to assist with planning.

Scott logged a jaw-dropping 3,614 hours.

Kathy Mellinger

Kathy Mellinger, who recently celebrated her sixth anniversary with the Red Cross, received the Tom Wozniak Volunteer Award.
Drivers needed to help move blood

This month, we want to know if you are ready to hit the road on behalf of the Red Cross! Transportation specialists are needed across Montana. Also, don’t miss this month’s Ketchup With Friends after a summer hiatus.

POSITION OF THE MONTH

How does it feel to help save a life? Transportation specialists know how exhilarating that is. You are the critical link between blood products getting from donors to blood recipients. Simply driving from collection locations to the processing center and out to hospitals helps save lives. Training is free, but the blood you deliver is priceless.

Title: Transportation specialist

Volunteers use Red Cross vehicles and can have a navigator ride along.

Location: Missoula, Bozeman, Great Falls and Kalispell.

Time requirements: Schedule yourself for one or more shifts a month as convenient for you.

Job Requirement: Position requires a valid driver’s license and a clean driving record.

Questions? Contact Gini at IDMT.Recruiting@redcross.org or by phone/text at 406-493-8778 for more information.

KETCHUP WITH FRIENDS, WE TOOK our summer break in August, but we are back with enthusiasm! Please join fellow volunteers at our virtual social time, Tuesday, Sept. 13, from 7:30-8 p.m.

Those who attend are eligible to win a door prize. Click here to join the meeting.

If you join and don’t have access, please send Nate Gilbert an email at Nate.Gilbert@RedCross.org.

JOIN THE TEAM

Are you interested in becoming a Restoring Family Links volunteer? Visit www.redcross.org/volunteer to complete your application or contact our team at DMT.Recruiting@redcross.org to learn more.

The Restoring Family Links program faces two big hurdles in Idaho and Montana — a lack of public awareness and language barriers — Joan said. Not enough communities and families know the Restoring Family Links program exists and that their local Red Cross can help them track down loved ones abroad, she said. Also, finding someone who can serve as an interpreter for any of a number of languages and dialects that might come through the door is tricky.

But she’s hopeful that with more visibility that could change and, more families will be put on a path to finding their missing loved ones.

“The good news is that anyone can help ship away at both of these challenges,” she said.

“Consider sharing … on social media or encourage bilingual friends and neighbors to volunteer for ad-hoc interpreting.”

Joan, who works at the Idaho State Board of Education, encourages others to sign up to volunteer with the Red Cross program. Most of the work can be done from home after business hours, she said, and the reward you get by knowing you’re helping someone move one step closer to locating a missing mother or father, brother or sister is incredibly fulfilling.

“You can tell there’s that sense of relief that someone is paying attention and action is being taken,” she said.

“I appreciate how unwavering the Red Cross is in its neutrality. Restoring Family Links couldn’t be possible without that complete absence of judgement or politics. This program, the International Committee of the Red Cross … this is what humans-looking-out-for-each-other is supposed to look like.”

— Matt Oechner
Regional Communications Director

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

“When that happened, I was confused and worried like everyone else, but I also had this tangible way to combat the chaos. Or so it felt,” she said. “RFL is not a panacea for what is happening there, or anywhere else. It is just a really basic program built around respect. Respect for roots. Respect for loss. Basic program built around respect.”

Joan has worked five cases since joining the Red Cross including helping Boise-area families with connections to Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Tracking down families across the globe can be extremely difficult.

Despite these challenges, Joan has done an amazing job jumping in and learning the program, said Sara Cease, the Red Cross Service to the Armed Forces and International Services director for Idaho and Montana. In fact, Joan has also helped the Cascades Region in Oregon with their RFL program after they experimented together.

“She is a true leader who has taken the program to new heights,” Sara said. “If you think of the dream volunteer, that’s Joan.”

In addition, Joan has been instrumental in helping to develop a program to match volunteer translators with families who are communicating with their missing loved ones. Joan has also been involved in training the new volunteers.

“Joan’s leadership is just exceptional,” Sara said.

Another big challenge is getting a closer connection to the rest of the Red Cross. In Oregon and Idaho, the volunteers were able to meet face to face, but in Montana, Joan has to rely on conference calls to meet with the other volunteers.

“We can’t all be in the same room,” Joan said. “But that’s that sense of feeling that everyone is supposed to look out for each other.”
New volunteer helps neighbors

When Will Lynn signed on to become a Montana Red Cross volunteer in April, he knew he might be responding to a home fire or two, but had no idea that less than two months later he would be out in the field helping his neighbors recover after historic flooding.

In June, heavy rains combined with quickly melting mountain snow pushed the Yellowstone, Stillwater and Chico Fork rivers to record levels, triggering devastating flooding in communities in Carbon, Stillwater and Park counties.

Close to 1,500 homes were destroyed or severely damaged including some outside of Will’s hometown of Absarokee.

Over the next few weeks, Will pitched in wherever he was needed, pivoting from one community to the next as the constantly evolving situation changed.

“Most of it was on the fly,” Will said. “You really have to be flexible in these situations.”

Will helped open shelters, arrange rides and work in a disaster recovery center, where he provided a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on.

“A lot of the people coming in were my neighbors,” Will said. “Quite a few people were from my church. I did a lot of commiserating and listening if they wanted to talk about it and work to point them in the right direction.”

That included working with a man he knew whose home became an island because the road and bridge were washed away, and the man had to take a raft to get to his house. Will was there to listen and help connect him with FEMA and other community resources.

“Will is a wonderful volunteer,” said Sherrilyn Hamilton, a Disaster Action Team volunteer who helps lead the team in Eastern Montana.

“He has a knack at seeing what a client needs whether it is just a minute of time, a smile or a cup of coffee, and (he is always) there to assist. Working with him is an absolute pleasure. Red Cross is a better organization with him on board.”

Will came to the Red Cross after a career as a rehabilitation counselor, helping people with disabilities live more independently.

Always civic-minded, Will enjoys donating his time to worthy causes.

“With these groups, it seems like they’re all gray hairs,” he said.

During the months-long flooding response in the region, more than 100 Red Cross volunteers and staff supported the disaster relief operation, some coming from as far away as Alaska and California.

Will said he’s proud of what they accomplished together and was happy to be part of a diverse team who came together with one goal – to help Montanans get through an extremely difficult time.

“I enjoyed being with people who really believe in what they were doing,” he said. “There were people from all over the country who all had the same vision regardless of things like politics or religion.

“During a disaster, these are the kind of people you want to be around.”

— Matt Ochner
Regional Communications Director

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN THE TEAM?

Red Cross is currently recruiting more volunteers to help the organization respond to disasters in Montana, Idaho and beyond. These Disaster Action Team members help deliver food and shelter — and just as importantly — provide emotional support and a shoulder to lean on for those impacted.

To learn more about becoming a Red Cross Disaster Action Team volunteer, visit redcross.org/volunteer, email DMTrc.Recruiting@redcross.org or text or call 406-493-8778.

For information about becoming a Red Cross Volunteer, contact your nearest Red Cross office.

Red Cross Volunteers and staff are there when you need them, and when you're ready to contribute, they will welcome you into their team.

For more information about volunteering, visit redcross.org or call 1-800-RED-CROSS – 1-800-733-2767.

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