

GLEANERS FOOD DISTRIBUTION & THRIFT STORE

"THE OLD METAL BUILDING"

Gleaners Food Distribution & Thrift Store, a non-profit organization where no one staff is paid, was the first of its kind to open in Sweet Home, Oregon. Their primary purpose is gleaning fields to feed the hungry, elderly, members, and volunteer workers. The clothing, housewares and other items are secondary to the organization. Elenore Phillips was the founder of the distribution center stemming from her need of not wanting to put her children to bed hungry.

From 1976 to 1985 the organization slowly began forming its conception, where to this day they hold their own meetings etc. Elenore Phillips secured the new facilities in 1990. Lois Carr, Martha Rivers, Myrtle Smith, Christine Wetzig, Edith Richardson, and Paul Richardson were just a few of the members working there at the time. Their comments were "Our building is totally amazing." "We couldn't imagine having light, heat, and air-conditioning." "It was overwhelming to all of us, and a huge step forward from the old store." "The question was, could we make it work?" "We all knew that it was a drastic change from the small, dingy old corrugated green building we rented from Beringers for \$700 a month.

The old forestry building started with \$760 a month for rent and having to raise \$20,000 within a year, but we did it and then we signed a contract for \$3,000 a month minimum. Lots of months we paid \$6,000 or \$9,000. The old building is now referred to as the "Metal Building." Gleaners has survived successfully to this day for the past five years since 1990, when the organization moved to their present location.

Christine Wetzig's memory of the old green metal building by Safeway, "It had a big wood stove in the west end, it had no ceiling just a high pitched metal roof, so it didn't hold heat

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very well. It was cold very, very cold, we can't forget how cold it got. The store was dirty, dank, cold, dark, dreary, and cramped. It had no kitchen, just a sink with running water. One of the workers brought in a hot plate to heat the water for coffee and tea. We had to bring our own food. It was crowded with all the donations that we accepted. At the east end of the building, there was a rest room. The cash register sat on a little table near the front door. Opposite the cash register was a couple of racks with clothes haphazardly hung on them. Near there were several boxes of housewares. Nothing in the store was priced. Instead, the workers would look the merchandise over and quote a price to the customers. The clothing racks were jammed so close together, that the customers had to turn sideways to get between the aisles. There were no shelves for household items. The store was ill-lighted making it hard to see inside the boxes of merchandise. The customers had to paw through them to get what they wanted." Lighting was better in the summer time because the big doors could be open.

Christine Wetzig remembered it being so cold and wet one day that they all huddled together by the small door that leads to the east end of the building that was used as a cold storage room. There was a wooden storage area along the ceiling with a little stairway that led up there. "It was awful up there! While we were all crowded together, one worker noticed a pile of trash on the dirt floor, I glanced down and saw a dead rat. A brave worker got a shovel to scoop it up and tossed it outside. There were spaces under the doors where the cold air, bugs, and rats came in." Edith Richardson and her husband Paul Richardson, recalls that some of the customers came in the door and backed out just as fast as they could. They said "Oh my." And left! "It was not a very nice place to shop" The customers came to shop out of curiosity because Gleaners was the first store in Sweet Home to sell used merchandise.

Lois Carr, a worker that went to the fields to help pick crops, became involved with Gleaners program in 1982. She along with others worked previously in the old metal building. She remembers a specific incident and the fun they had on their gleans. "We would carpool to pick up a load of fresh fish from the coast. There was seaweed, and everything else mixed in with the fish, having nowhere to store it, we dumped the fish into someone's wading pool. We then divided the fish into shares and distributed them to families. They had to clean the fish themselves.

Lois Carr remembers another particular glean that was so wet, cold, and muddy weather. She drove her station wagon to the fields to load it up with crops. One of the men drove his truck with another male passenger to also load it with crops. Lois Carr and the other cars were following the truck out of the muddy fields. The men stood around their cars saying, "Pour it to it ladies, pour it to it." It was funny at the time; she remembers laughing a long time afterward.

The old metal building had no area to distribute food, so the field pickings were divided up in basements or garages, then distributed and packed in team leader's homes. Sometimes the produce was put out in front of the store, then divided up into portions according to how many were in each family. When the crops arrived at the store, they were put in picnic coolers temporarily until the families came for their shares. Lois Carr recalls a time when Henry Phillips led a caravan of twenty cars to Corvallis OSU to pick peaches. Henry Phillips was leading driving in the fast lane and refusing to change to the slow lane. So here we were all twenty cars driving in the fast lane, blinking the headlights and honking the horns to get Henry Phillips to move over. Most of us were real upset. We followed his truck for three miles until he finally moved into the slow lane.

In 1990, the members of Gleaners Food Distribution & Thrift Store were getting prepared to make the transition to their new building. "We were all in a dither and very anxious to move in." Gladys Smith recollects. Previously the store received little recognition. However, it soon became widely known at the new location. Most of the volunteers that had previously worked in the old metal building are the same workers that are still here today, nine years later.

Elenore Phillips began her search for a possible new building; she heard that the old forestry building had been vacant for a few years. The building had deteriorated somewhat. It needed remodeling and had an exorbitant sales price for it. The owner settled for a fair price after Elenore Phillips explained what the Gleaners organization's main purpose represented. Martha Rivers, Edith Richardson, Paul Richardson, Gladys Smith, Christine Wetzig, Myrtle Smith, Lois Carr and the other members were ecstatic. Their first comments were, "It has a floor, ceiling, heating and an air-conditioning system, and a look a kitchen!" They all remembered how extremely cold, dirty, dank, dark, dreary, and cramped the old metal building was.

Elenore Phillips's efforts to petition for permits went on for several months without results. After going through several grueling petitioning permits, attending hearings and having to prove to the senator, representor, commissioner and consortium of Salem Oregon that Sweet Home had a need for their organization, were they able to get a nonprofit status, grants and other benefits that they wouldn't have gotten otherwise. In 1990 they moved to their present location. The volunteer workers brought sack lunches for one and one-half years until the kitchen was remodeled from two rooms into one. A confection oven, stove, new flooring and a sink was added. The goal for Gleaners was to provide a lunch program for its workers, and to have a cook prepare lunch everyday. The luncheon program has been enjoyed by everyone, and they were

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glad to have it. The smell from food being cooked lingered down the hallway to the entire store and all could tell it was lunch time.

The men's, women's, and children's clothing departments have many racks to handle the daily volume of donations that we receive. There are departments for housewares, crafts, toys, games and light hardware items. There is a men's and women's bathroom, a bargain, dressing and a book room. There is a complete shelving unit for shoes, housewares and donated items, which easily displays the inventory on hand, and a lot of wall space for future shelving needs. There was an area in the back to sort and price donations. Up front was an area for the cashiers and customers to ring up sales, and on the side of the building was the office area and was room for some furniture as the store is no longer taking furniture donations. There is a separate area in the back opposite the sorting tables that has shelves along the wall and a table that is used for the packaging and distributions of food. The kitchen is also used to sort, repack and store large bulk packages of food that are donated from the warehouses.

The store is bright with lots of sunlight shining through the windows. The customer's first overall impression as they come into the store, was not surprising to us. We heard their comments, "It's a much nicer and clean store than the old one." Christine Wetzig and the others remember long ago when the customers came into the old metal building, only out of curiosity and then backing up as fast as they could, saying, "Oh my! This is awful. It's not a very nice place to shop."

The store has tiled and carpeted floors, many large windows throughout with drapes and blinds, wide aisles for customers to shop with carts and an abundance of clothing racks in each department.

In the back outside lot are partitions used for large hardware items and storage, and still enough room for trucks to drive in with food and clothing donations. There is also a large cooler and a freezer on the lot.

I worked for Gleaners since 1998, and had observed how dedicated, cheerful and friendly the volunteers were. I was amazed at their positive attitudes that shown through daily, especially when large loads of donations come in. Listening to the ladies comments as they sniffed at the smell of lunch coming from the kitchen. One would say "I think we're having spaghetti and garlic bread." Another would say, "No, I think its tacos or maybe a lasagna casserole." Then "I'm hungry, is it lunch time already" Their smiling faces and chatter at the luncheon table added to the already good feeling I had from working there. There was always juice, cold refrigerated water, coffee and sometimes snacks available. When the volunteers recall the time of having nothing but a hot plate to make coffee and tea in the old metal building, they are reminded how truly grateful they are. I have received considerable satisfaction from working there. I felt comfortable in being a part of the comradeship. I was accepted, acknowledged and was given a chance to display my creative handy crafts. Being in charge of the bargain room, brought back memories of the boutique I once owned. The male workers were always there if a person needed something heavy lifted.

Lois Carr's comment was, "No matter our background, or the different personalities, we all seem to have a common theme for working here and in the long run, we have been able to overcome obstacles, and be very supportive of one another. We feel good because we worked for our food, instead of coming in just to get a free hand-out." The distribution center has grown so much in five years and has a very successful system for food distribution. Lois Carr set a special

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point system for the distribution of extra non-food items given to the volunteers if they worked extended hours.

Virginia McNeer is our coordinator now. She is diplomatic, knowledgeable in handling people in the business industry, a good listener and supports all the volunteers that work at Gleaners. Her appearance is neat, wearing casual attire from donated clothing. Her hair is curled and pulled back with a hair ribbon, comb or barrette. She is in her 70s, has a wonderful smile, a gleam in her eyes when she is pleased and has a delightful spirit that shows through when she chuckles, which is rarely seen by anyone.

Per Virginia McNeer, "I know there are hungry people here in Sweet Home, but their pride won't let them partake in receiving free food. The most important aspect that Gleaners Distribution Food Center & Thrift Store has to offer is the volunteer for food program. We have a variety of duties to choose from even tasks shut-ins could do. Our members feel better in accepting food knowing that they volunteered their time for it. Our organization wants to reach those who want to volunteer their services, even if they don't need food at least one-third of our adoptee members receive distributions, either being handicapped because of age, illness, or infirmity.

The desire of Gleaners Food Distribution & Thrift Store is to reach the rest of the hungry individuals here in Sweet Home and inform them of our volunteer work program. We need individuals to dedicate their time, commit to helping others participate regularly in our program and especially to glean the fields. Virginia McNeer wants to reach more than 10% of our population, as she also does not want a child to be put to bed hungry or hear of individuals going hungry. The donations from the farmer's crops and various sources has increased tremendously

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since “The Old Metal Building” days.