

The Pearl on Pearl Street

For Gretchen Dubie, a meaningful life is a life well lived



As a teen in Vermont, Gretchen Dubie longed for anonymity. But when you grow up in a small town trailing four older brothers and constantly bumping into 31 (31!) first cousins, it can be hard to find a stranger.

“That’s why I left,” she explains. “It was growing too small. Everywhere I went I knew someone.”

What seemed burdensome then is something Dubie has worked to find again in Eugene, both for her own benefit and for Oregon Supported Living (OSLP), the organization she’s in charge of.

“Eugene is becoming like that,” she laughs, “but as an adult it’s nice to be connected.”

Anyone who knows Dubie, even a little, wouldn’t doubt that the road from Vermont was fraught with risk, chance, adventure, and more than a few turns. Her first stint in Eugene was supposed to last only a few minutes, just a view from the freeway as she drove on by, but a broken-down car led to a change of plan. She found work with youth, then with people with disabilities, and eventually moved into abuse prevention, a field which led her to a three-year stint in Ukraine.

“I was blown away by Ukraine,” she says. It’s totally different there than what you imagine... Kiev is like New York City.”



Ukraine was just coming out of a civil war and the level of poverty was profound. “It gave me so much knowledge of poverty and institutional life,” Dubie says of her time in Ukraine. “I had no idea how much it would play into my next life.”

That next life started immediately upon her return to Oregon. Dubie was hired by OSLP’s board not only to be the Executive Director but to take the organization into a new era of fundraising. OSLP has never been quite the same since. You could point to the growth (more revenue, more homes, more programs, more financial reserves) as evidence, but those things are tangential to the heart of the change, which comes down to one foundational question: “What makes your life meaningful?”

Each potential hire gets asked that question, and it continues to drive processes and programs at OSLP long after the hiring process is over.

“I’m passionate about changing their perspective about what life is really about,” Dubie says. “There’s so much more to life than food, shelter, and clothing. Dignity, respect, individual choice, they all play into the basic rights of people AND what supplements basic necessities?”

“That’s why I started our arts and culture program. I wanted there to be more opportunities for people we support in the community. We started with 35 people, and now there are 550 people per year. People need connection – a way to express themselves – a way to feel pride.”

OSLP’s arts and culture program isn’t only open to people in our services, it is open to the entire community and utilized extensively. Each program, whether it’s art, yoga, music, sign language, cooking, or something else entirely, connects people to things, friends, and activities that add meaning to their lives. Whether you have a disability or not, there’s room to grow and learn and create. Including community leaders and members in these programs isn’t an afterthought, it works almost in reverse.

“That’s what made the program billable,” Dubie states. “But it’s also made us successful in the community: partnerships, employment, the Lane Arts Council, etc. It’s had a ripple effect.”

Those hoping to brand their organizations in this way, as an integral part of their community’s culture, should know that it doesn’t happen by accident. “I serve on several boards,” Dubie confirms. “I do a lot of volunteering.”

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Dubie organizes concerts and other events – many of them outside of OSLP. She reaches out to peer organizations to conduct joint activities like Halloween dances. She ensures that OSLP art exhibits can be found all over town and that the best pieces are rented and displayed by local businesses. “Eugene’s arts scene has grown through OSLP’s participation in it,” Dubie says.

Maybe hardest of all, though, Dubie stretches herself to bring the right people into contact with her organization.

“Work with people at every level. Even when you think you can’t, you can,” Dubie asserts. She remembers one donor in particular, a woman she

took to lunch for a year before finally getting up the nerve to ask her to join OSLP’s board (it was a yes).

“Diving in has had a priceless, monumental impact on my life,” Dubie says. “The greater the risk, the more I’ve gained. Risk taking has made OSLP what it is today.”

Within limits, of course. Even as someone willing to take chances, Dubie has slowed down the growth rate at OSLP due to the DSP staffing crisis. “We have been on the track of growth, but cautious,” She says. “We don’t want to sacrifice quality. I’ve put on the brakes because I don’t have the staff to grow and retain quality.”

If quality is defined as a meaningful life, it takes effort to keep it at the core of everything OSLP does. “When you think about a meaningful life, in the beginning it’s all the things you would expect,” Dubie says, “music, family, friends, etc. And it’s all the things that our clients would not have without the arts and culture program.”

“Last month I asked all the managers that question. Then to envision – what if you took all of that away and all you had left was housing, food and clothes?”

In addition to the meaning she finds at work, Dubie has found new life in the birth of her first grandchild. “The joy that it brings to a stressful day,” She says, “is unlike anything else.” Hardly a day goes by that she doesn’t see him.

“It’s like the worst and best thing in the world. You fear that something will happen to them and you have no control. It’s all on your kids and the care and modelling that you put into them.”





Becoming a grandmother has changed Dubie's retirement plan of sailing off into the sunset (literally – she's certified to sail boats with a 54-keel). "I ache when I'm gone even for a week. It's changed my whole life plan," she says.

Her plans may be changed in the long term, but it won't stop her from attempting another 90 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail this summer and working toward her goal of hiking its length in Oregon. She'll also be leading a pack of novice hikers on a two-night trek to a mountain lake, kayaking, whacking tennis balls, sailing on Tuesday nights, and "lots of outdoorsy things."

Chances are, she won't do any of these things anonymously.