

In Oregon's Klamath Falls, one woman is the force behind The Salvation Army's social services

How God placed Debi Leighton right where she was meant to be

"People are hungry for kindness," said Debi Leighton, Service Center Coordinator for The Salvation Army in Klamath Falls, Oregon. "There's not a lot of kindness out there sometimes."

Over four decades, she's made it her mission to distribute kindness to her community, along with meeting people's physical needs.



Leighton arrived in Klamath Falls in the late 1970s, when she joined The Salvation Army corps (church) there as a youth worker. She'd grown up at the [Medford \(Oregon\) Corps](#).

"The Salvation Army was our life, literally," Leighton said. "If we weren't at home, we were at the corps."

Soon, Klamath Falls, a rural town in the high desert, became home.

"I met a cowboy and got married," Leighton said.

In 1984, the Klamath Falls corps officers asked Leighton to transfer to social services. Although she had never seen herself in that role, she was willing.

"They asked me to take social services for a few months, through Christmas," she said. "And now here I am all these years later. God sometimes will take you out of where you are and plant you in a different pot."

Years later, in that capacity, she was able to steer the Klamath Falls Salvation Army through its corps closure in 2005. While corps programs ended, the social services office stayed open.

"If they had wanted to close The Salvation Army social services, they would have to do it with me kicking and screaming," she said. "This is our ministry. We don't serve just souls; we serve bodies—people who can't get the services anywhere else. We have services that nobody else in town does. We needed to stay open."

Since then, Leighton has guided the Klamath Falls Service Center through several locations, from a two-room office, to the old Salvation Army thrift store, to its current location in a free-standing building where they have room to spread out. Additionally, she oversees 20 service extension units in southern Oregon.

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Niki Sampson

The Klamath Falls center is open Monday through Friday, providing food boxes and a Friday produce giveaway, rent and utility assistance and bus passes. Leighton said since the pandemic, the food box distribution has jumped from 350 boxes a month to over 800. In addition to Leighton, the center has one part-time employee, a number of volunteers and an advisory council of 12 committed to The Salvation Army’s presence in the community.

Leighton said the Friday produce giveaway draws up to 200 families. She’s responsible for crowd control, giving her an opportunity to offer more than food.

“I take out my little devotional book, and we do devotions,” she said. “We do prayer in line with my volunteers and all the staff. So we do a lot of emotional and spiritual care on top of just food boxes and clothing and things that people are looking for.”

Key to the service center’s success in meeting needs is a close partnership with the Klamath-Lake County Food Bank and Leighton’s long-time working relationship with its recently retired Executive Director, Niki Sampson.

“Debi is a saint,” Sampson said. “She always knew that people need to be fed—a basic need—and sheltered, and that’s what she’s done. And she’s the kindest, sweetest, most wonderful, caring person that anyone would be blessed to meet.”

Sampson knows what it’s like being “boots on the ground” in social services.

“We don’t do it for the accolades,” she said. “We do it to get the job done. We are not about intent. We’re about outcomes. And for Debi, that goal has always been in her mind.”

Recently, The Salvation Army acknowledged Leighton’s 42 years of service during the Western Territory’s Testify Congress. [Salvation Army international leader General Lyndon Buckingham](#) presented her with the Certificate in Recognition of Exceptional Service, an honor awarded to Salvationists or friends whose work for The Salvation Army is of such outstanding value that it should be permanently recorded.

“In Klamath Falls, Debi Leighton is The Salvation Army,” said Territorial President of Women’s Ministries and Territorial Secretary for Spiritual Life Development Commissioner Colleen Riley prior to the presentation.

Leighton said her favorite memories, and her motivation, are the people who come to The Salvation Army for help.

“But really, this is where God wanted me to be, what God wanted me to do,” Leighton said. “I love the Army, and even after I retire, I’m not going to totally retire and leave. I want to come back and volunteer...the Army’s important here in Klamath Falls.”

Do Good:

- Have you ever found yourself wanting to volunteer but unsure of what to do or how to go about it? Here’s the key: You can make an impact for good with whatever time and skills you have. Whatever your interest, there is a *you-sized* need for goodness in the world. [Get the guide on How To Be An Impactful Volunteer](#) with nine habits to make a difference when giving back.