

SEP 15 1988

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Awards honor Minden's community work

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Kathie Minden's lengthy and varied resume of service is based on deep-felt compassion for others

By LISA DANIELS
THE OREGONIAN

GRESHAM — Kathie Minden leaves books in laundries for children to read, persuades business people to buy school supplies for poor students and plants vegetables for the hungry. Last week, she helped organize a festival that drew more than 1,000 people to Gresham's poorest neighborhood.

The 51-year-old Rockwood resident works nonstop for the community's neediest. She explains that she works so hard because she cannot forget that her family was once so poor she didn't even have a pencil for school, and because it is part of God's plan.

"I was written off by society at a very young age," said Minden, who grew up in the 1950s and '60s as the sixth of 10 children in Rockwood. "There are millions of kids like me out there. ... I'm determined other children don't go through what we had to go through."

Minden is being honored twice this week for her service. On Thursday, the Altrusa International Foundation gave Minden its Community Leadership Award, an honor the worldwide nonprofit gives to one woman a year. On Saturday, Legacy Mount Hood Medical Center will give Minden another award for working on behalf of children.

"She is one person," said Judy Head, immediate past president of Altrusa International of Greater Gresham. "But she certainly shows that one person can make a difference."

Two decades of efforts

Minden has been trying to make a difference in east Multnomah County for almost two decades. In that time, she has worked with more than a dozen public, business and religious entities, including the Reynolds School District, East Metro Human Rights Coalition, Children First for Oregon, Legacy Mount Hood Medical Center, League of Women Voters, Mount Hood Literacy Coalition and Altrusa International of Greater Gresham.

Minden has helped lead an effort to revive and unite Rockwood, the struggling west Gresham neighborhood that has suffered from poverty, crime and a high turnover of residents. This spring, she helped plant a community garden in Vance Park, hoping to bring people and peace back to an often forgotten park just off Southeast 182nd Avenue.

The Altrusa award honors her for leading the club's Celebration of Literacy, which included a book drive, poetry reading and school



ROBERT BACH/THE OREGONIAN
Making sandwiches for hungry children visiting the Gresham Corps of the Salvation Army is just one of many deeds Kathie Minden does for the community's youth. "It always comes back to the kids," says the mother of two. "I was called to be a children's advocate."

lunch plates filled with green eggs and ham to remind diners of Dr. Seuss' book of the same name. By the end of the event, more than 40 people had called the event co-sponsor, Mount Hood Literacy Coalition, to ask about tutoring.

The medical center award honors Minden for working on so many projects that benefit children.

Minden also has won praise from everyone from Mayor Charles Becker to Lorena Campbell of the East County Caring Community for doing things that don't appear on a resume. She makes sandwiches for children who come to the Salvation Army Gresham Corps, where she works as a secretary. She shares her expertise freely. She and her husband helped a woman move on a day's notice.

Remembers childhood poverty

"I have compassion," she said. The compassion comes from her religious faith, her conviction that

"God's grace should be shining through us."

It also comes from knowing what it's like to be young, uncertain and poor.

Minden grew up in Rockwood in a two-room house one of her sisters refers to as a shack.

Her father, whom she says had a drinking problem, worked in construction. Her mother tried to stretch what they had by growing vegetables in the garden and making her children's clothes.

Other children taunted Minden and her siblings for being poor. The weeks before she was to start the fourth grade, she fretted because she didn't even have a pencil or a sheet of paper.

"I didn't have that security of having needs provided for," she said.

Minden found escape in books. She devoured Nancy Drew mysteries, Black Beauty stories and anything she could check out of the library.

She also got support and encouragement from several adults outside her family, including Harold Oliver, an east county educator whom she knew from church.

Minden graduated from David Douglas High School and studied at Portland State University for a year. When money ran out, she went to work. Eventually she married and moved to Washington state.

But Minden felt called back to east county in the early 1980s.

Today Minden is focusing her energy on creating a nonprofit that would promote literacy year-round. She'll use the \$500 from the Altrusa award to get started.

She'll also continue gathering school supplies, planting a garden to feed the hungry and doing what she can for the community's children.

"It isn't a burden to do this because it's a labor of love," Minden said.