



# INTERFAITH CONNECTION

Partners in faith. Changing lives.

## WHY WE ARE GRATEFUL

Seventeen years ago, Cherie married a great guy. But a few years into their marriage, the man she married went missing. Her husband began drinking heavily. He became increasingly irrational, and was threatening and abusive to Cherie and their four sons.

“There was none of that nice person left,” she recalls, while sitting at her kitchen table in the family’s apartment at Our House, Interfaith’s temporary housing triplex in Ferndale.

Last summer, Cherie and the boys got away for a camping trip. As their weekend ended, she couldn’t bear the thought of going home. With nothing left to lose, she headed north. She told her sons they were moving to Washington, where she was born.

“They were so happy they didn’t have to go back,” she says.

She had family members in the state, but they weren’t able to help. So Cherie, her four sons, and their two small dogs slept in their truck in the parking lot of the Bellingham Walmart.

Homeless shelters that accept women and children do not accept boys over age 12, and the family wasn’t willing to be separated.

It was hard to keep their spirits up. But despite the ordeal, “we had one blessing after another,” she says.

Her boys’ good senses of humor helped make life bearable. Free community meals and the food bank donations kept them fed.

A kind stranger offered them a place indoors for a few nights. Later, a local couple who minister to the homeless let the family stay in a cabin on their property. The cabin was tiny and had no running water. But it wasn’t a truck. They were enormously grateful.

After five months in the cabin, they arrived at Our House.

All four boys all agree hot showers are the best part of living in the apartment. For Cherie, Our House has been a place to begin rebuilding their lives.

Now, Cherie is receiving appropriate treatment for her fibromyalgia, a chronic disease she has battled for years that causes severe body pain and fatigue.

She plans to return to school and go through an accounting training program. She used to manage a pet store, but fibromyalgia means she needs to retrain for a less physical job.

She will soon sign a one-year lease on an apartment. She looks forward to increased family and financial stability and getting her sons’ schooling back on track.

“I just want them to have peace,” she says.

With the help of Interfaith congregations and donors, Cherie’s simple dream for her family is closer to reality than it has ever been.

“We’re just very grateful,” she says.

The expanded Our House complex opened in July 2014 and has housed 16 families (67 individuals, 42 of them children). 85% of families in Interfaith temporary housing go on to obtain permanent housing.



*Cherie’s sons show off the flowers they are growing on the porch of their temporary home at Our House*

## WHY WE VOLUNTEER

*Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

*Micah 6:8*

I have always thought of myself as a worker and that makes it easy for me to serve others by volunteering.

Before Our House was built in Ferndale, five Ferndale congregations rented an apartment for families. I remember meeting this woman who was living in the apartment. It was a hot August day and she needed a fan to keep herself and a young child cool. The United Church of Ferndale is the go-to place for supplies because it is centrally located and we have the storage available.

After delivering the fan, I was later privileged to help this same woman move into a permanent apartment, take her to speak at one of our yearly meetings, and when I run into her at various places such as the YMCA at 6 am, we have a connection.

Some families I may never meet but I know when I am gathering replacement supplies, leaving a stuffed animal for a family with young children, or leaving a vase of cut garden flowers, I am welcoming a family into a safe home.

*Marta Hand  
Volunteer, United Church of Ferndale*



## WHY WE DONATE

Soon after moving to Bellingham in 1991, my husband, Bob, and I attended an Interfaith Auction. We learned how many adults and children in Whatcom County desperately need assistance with shelter, clothing, medical care and food. We witnessed how the enthusiasm of the faith communities could be transformed into generous gifts of time, expertise and fundraising. The effectiveness of collective efforts was manifested in the accumulating stories of people moving from despair to hope.

Over the years we have seen how the Interfaith Coalition has grown in membership, staff and outreach. We have been inspired by the many ways people throughout Whatcom County have been engaged in all

aspects of the programs—ranging from collecting coats for the annual coat drive, to volunteering in the Severe Weather Shelter, to raising the money to build and maintain emergency and transitional housing units. But simply put—the need goes on. The many faces of homelessness compel us to consider how we can make sure that children are not sleeping in cars, that families are not living under freeway ramps and that hunger and despair do not dominate every moment of their lives.

Serving on the Interfaith Coalition Board gives me an opportunity to learn from and work alongside dedicated members from diverse faith communities. Together we deliberate how to optimally utilize our unique network. Together we find the resources to support longstanding projects that serve those in need. Together we join community members in contributing financially to ensure the success of our projects that launch individuals into enhanced quality of life and, in some cases, self-sufficiency. It is in working with and through Interfaith Coalition that we move from concern to action and from our own comfort to providing comfort. It is through giving to Interfaith Coalition that our shared monetary gifts can become shared opportunities for vulnerable people in our community.

*Barbara Mathers-Schmidt  
Interfaith Board Member*

## WHY WE PARTICIPATE

*The Rev. Gary Shoemaker, left, and members of First Christian Church with supplies for Disciple's House, the Interfaith temporary housing unit that the congregation supports on its own property.*



First Christian Church continues its ongoing connection with Interfaith Coalition because we feel that together we can accomplish greater things than we can do alone. Beyond that, there's an added spirit that comes from joining together across the faith spectrum to joyfully work together to better the world. We give and receive countless blessings because of our continuing work with Interfaith. We couldn't do what we are doing without Interfaith!

*The Rev. Gary Shoemaker  
Pastor, First Christian Church*

## CELEBRATING 35 YEARS OF HISTORY

*This year, Interfaith Coalition of Whatcom County is celebrating 35 years of serving our community's most vulnerable residents. Over the next several issues of our newsletter, we will be revisiting the story of how a small number of clergy, lay people, and non-profit leaders came together in a time of crisis, and went on to create an organization that continues to change and save lives.*

### WHO WOULD HAVE IMAGINED?

...that an idea born from a pastor's frustration over cuts to social services in the early 1980s would evolve into the organization we know today as Interfaith Coalition of Whatcom County.

...that a coalition of faith committees inaugurated on October 17, 1981 would grow into a membership of 45 faith communities working together to meet human needs in our community.

...that within 35 years this would evolve into an independent community medical center (Interfaith Community Health Center – now UnityCare

Northwest) serving the most vulnerable members of our community.

...that an organization with a budget of \$1,540 in 1982 could grow to an organization with a budget of \$410,000 in 2016.

...that Interfaith's first venture into housing, Opportunity House (a partnership with Opportunity Council in 1985) would lead to the current Interfaith network of eleven units of family housing.

...that in 35 years the work of Interfaith Coalition could extend so deeply into our community, providing warm winter coats for those without, offering a simple meal four nights a week to those on the streets, providing shelter to the homeless during freezing weather, bringing holiday gifts to homeless and needy families, raising funds for our needy neighbors through beautiful music programs and exciting auctions, and recruiting people of diverse backgrounds to live out their faith through service to others.



**INTERFAITH COALITION  
OF WHATCOM COUNTY**

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Bellingham, WA 98225

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**SAVE THE DATE!**

**Interfaith Coalition Annual Hope Meeting**

1981 – 2016  
*Celebrating 35 years of service to our community!*

**Monday, October 17 at 7 pm**  
**Bellingham Covenant Church**  
**1530 E. Bakerview Road**

Join us in celebrating Interfaith Coalition's programs and history. Hear from our volunteers. See the faces of hope. Learn how you and your congregation can be involved in exciting new programs serving vulnerable families in our community.

**Enjoy music, fellowship and refreshments with us!**

**LIKE INTERFAITH COALITION  
OF WHATCOM COUNTY  
ON FACEBOOK!**

