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Raising funds, lifting spirits (Community Builder)

By Kurt Hildebrand for the Daily Courier

This month's conversation is with Judy Basker, a native of Grants Pass and retired fundraiser, most recently with the Rogue Community College Foundation.



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier

Judy Basker, a member of the Rogue Gateway Rotary Club, poses for a photo outside Wild River Pub in Grants Pass prior to a meeting of the club. "I love Rotary," says Basker, who is a fundraising specialist.

Q: Thank you so much for your time to share a bit about your life, your career and your journey. Could you tell me what was it like growing up in Grants Pass?

Judy Basker: Growing up in Grants Pass was fun. I'm the fourth of five kids born in four years and 10 months with no twins. There was always a crowd, and my mother was larger than life, an engaging and enchanting person. She had us doing many activities and both parents made it clear that we were all college-bound. From our earliest memories, there were expectations that we would achieve to the best of our academic abilities.

Q: Where did your life take you when you first left your hometown?

Basker: I went to college at the University of San Francisco, which is a Jesuit sister school to Gonzaga and Santa Clara. My dad had earned his degree there. I wanted to go to school in a city, but I didn't want to go east. So I was in San Francisco and I really, really loved that. I loved the cultural mix from early on.

Q: What came after that?

Basker: Well, while I was there, I got to do my junior year in Florence, Italy, and that was just an amazing experience. The program was sponsored through Gonzaga; it's called Gonzaga in Florence. We had about 90 students and maybe 10 of us came from schools other than Gonzaga. That was really a life-changing, wonderful experience, being in Florence for a year.

Q: So, you're retired, yet you seem very busy. I'm wondering what's your secret to staying active in retirement?

Basker: I am one of those few people who really likes to raise money. I enjoy doing it. And one of the results of that is I've been invited to join a lot of different boards and give input and counsel. I've been careful and cautious with that, because I don't personally think there's any secret to fundraising and I'm not a miracle worker. And I love Rotary. I joined Rotary in Medford 13 years ago when I first got back to the area. And I'd always wanted to be a Rotarian, but I traveled with many of my jobs, and it wasn't until I got back to Southern Oregon that I could make it to the meetings. After I retired, I left the Medford Rotary Club and joined the Rogue Gateway Club in Grants Pass. I just finished a year as president and that was interesting. So that's kept me somewhat busy.

Q: What do you see as Josephine County's greatest asset?

Basker: It's the climate, the people, and the potential that exists here.

Q: When did you first get involved in fundraising or donor development?

Basker: I was probably 13 years old in junior high school, and I was the one that always sold the candy for the pep club or whatever was going on. Even though originally, I majored in communication arts and wanted to be Barbara Walters, I ended up going to law school and worked as an attorney for a few years. I think I was pretty good, but I never had any fun. It was always a fight about something. I did some other things for a while, but early on, say in my 20s and early 30s, people would say to me, you really belong in development. "You should really be working in fundraising." In my late 30s I got a job back at Willamette University where I'd gone to law school. My job was to visit people and engage them to see if they wanted to support the university. For me, that was super fun and really interesting.

My mom taught us that if you have enough, it's your privilege to share. Not your duty, not your obligation — it's your privilege. And that was always my mindset. I never feel guilty asking anybody to share resources. If they say, no, it doesn't hurt my feelings. I know other people have different priorities.

Q: You make it sound easy, and I think you're right; most people don't love the idea of asking for money.

Basker: I've been asked a lot of times, what's your secret? And I don't think it's a secret. I don't think you can necessarily teach people how to be a fundraiser. I think you must share certain qualities. It helps to be philanthropic yourself. It helps to be outgoing and not afraid to ask. And then you can't get your feelings hurt or take it personally if somebody says no or they don't respond at all, which is another way of saying no. I don't feel vulnerable. I think a lot of people feel vulnerable when they ask for support for certain things.

Q: Have you observed fundraising professionals who are just not inclined to be philanthropic?

Basker: I guess the answer in the abstract is yes. There's such a thing as not being philanthropic because you don't have the ability to share. That's one thing. But if you expect other people to give when you're not interested or willing, it just doesn't work as well. It's kind of part of our culture. The whole idea of being American is that we share and we collectively pay for things that we can't afford individually. We pay taxes for schools even if we don't have children, that kind of thing. Being philanthropic is part of our history and our heritage and one of the best parts of being American.

Q: So why have you been drawn to higher education in your career?

Basker: I like to be around people who are smart, interested, active and want to talk about ideas. And I like art, music, and theater and all those things. Education helps people move ahead.

Q: What do you think are the greatest challenges facing higher education today?

Basker: I think price. The cost of everything has just kind of gotten out of control. I'm not exactly sure how to fix that, but I am certain that we could do better. Nobody wants to graduate with $200,000 in debt. You must make enough money to pay back your loans and so forth.

Q: What's one thing that you hope never changes about Josephine County?

Basker: The beauty, the natural beauty. And there's a kind of a village feel to this place, especially the downtown. There are quaint little shops and restaurants and activities in the downtown area. That's part of what makes it really a special place. We can do more, but there is a cozy feel in a little village-like downtown.

Q: Now the flip side, what's one thing that you think must change for Josephine County to thrive in the future?

Basker: Well, to be honest, I think we need more industry and business. That's not a popular answer necessarily. People think of Josephine County as a retirement place, and they don't necessarily want to see industry here. But you have to have some kind of good base for jobs for people. It can't just be medical facilities. So, I think we need industry.

Q: What's your hope for the youth of Southern Oregon?

Basker: Opportunity and to be able to find out what their passions are, pursue their passions, and to feel safe in doing that. That's sort of everyone's goal, to find out what you're really good at and if you can make a living at it, good. If not, to make a living and then have enough extra resources to do what's good and right to help the community.

Q: What have you noticed about coming back to Grants Pass after many years?

Basker: I lived in Grants Pass until I was 18, and those were kind of the glory years. The timber industry was thriving and everybody who wanted to go to college could earn enough each summer to pay for college, certainly at RCC and some other places. Coming back 40 years later things had drastically changed. The mindset of some people in Josephine County is they don't want to pay tax. They don't appreciate the notion that you have to help others.

Q: What have you learned in fundraising?

Basker: You don't have to be wealthy to be philanthropic. That's something people get confused with all the time. The question is not, "Who are the rich people?" The question is, "Who are the philanthropic people? Who are the people who want to share?" The biggest gifts I've closed in my career proportionally came from teachers, nurses, and ministers, based upon their comparative wealth. So, there's a difference between being wealthy and being philanthropic.

The other thing that studies show is that giving is good for you. It's good for your body, your mind, your spirit, your soul to help others, whether that's money or volunteer work. I read this month in the Chronicle of Philanthropy, when you're feeling down, go pull some weeds for somebody else. Do whatever it is that you can do to help your community.

Q: Any suggestions as to how Josephine County can support all the fundraising endeavors?

Basker: If we tithe to our community, I can't tell you how much better off we'd be. I know so many people whose kids are doing better than their parents, but Mom and Dad are still going to leave all their money to their kids. If folks would leave even 10% of their estate to whatever it is they care about, we could fund everything.

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