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FEATURED

## Everyday People: Retired pilot helps children in need

Clayton provides groceries for children

By Nicole Bales, The Astorian

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Charlie Clayton

After moving away from Astoria for a 31-year career as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force, and then as a flight instructor for Boeing, Charlie Clayton returned after retiring about a decade ago.

Since then, he has embarked on a third career: helping children in need.

Clayton became a volunteer for Court Appointed Special Advocates — known as CASA — a national association that provides help for abused or neglected children.

Up until the coronavirus pandemic closed schools, Clayton also drove school buses for the Astoria School District. It was during that time he noticed some children on the bus carrying bags of groceries with them on Fridays, thanks to a program that provided food to children in need for the weekends.

When he later found out the program was discontinued, Clayton decided to fill the gap.

After working with the schools, his church — Grace Episcopal Church — and the Clatsop Community Action Regional Food Bank, Clayton started Supplemental Nutrition for Astoria Children, also known as the SNAC Program. He began delivering grocery bags to students in January 2022.

Clayton and his volunteers are delivering about 90 bags of groceries to students in Astoria schools.

“I loved the kids that were riding on my school bus,” said Clayton, a father of three daughters and grandfather to four grandchildren. “And I remembered them carrying the sacks and how excited they were to have just extra food for the weekend.

“Some of these kids ... they get free breakfast, free lunch at school, but that’s the only nutrition they really get. So I just felt bad that they weren’t getting that. And I had the desire and passion to put this together. And fortunately, everybody I’ve dealt with in all of those groups responded.”

Clayton said he and a dedicated group of retired volunteers put the bags together on Thursdays at the food bank.

He said a little more than half of the food in the bags comes through the food bank. The largest expense, he said, is purchasing the rest of the food from big-box stores in the area.

Clayton’s goal for the program is to eventually find a corporate sponsor that will provide donations or discounts on food.

“Probably the cheerful thing about it is to know that everybody is on board for it,” he said. “Anybody I talk to is like, ‘Oh, that’s a great thing.’ I’ve had people reach in their pocket and pull out a \$20 bill and say, ‘Put this towards it.’”

**Nicole Bales**

Reporter

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