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Suzanne Suther retires from Issaquah Chamber

Outgoing president leaves with a long list of accomplishments

By Debbie Berto



Suzanne Suther

When Suzanne Suther took over leadership of the Issaquah Chamber of Commerce 20 years ago, she was given a desk, a chair and two boxes of files.

"Okay, Suzie, go make a chamber," then-President Jack Porter told her.

The chamber had about 90 members, but half had not paid their dues. The office on Gilman Boulevard was a model log cabin home. Suther knew the chamber was nearly bankrupt, and worried each month if she would get her paycheck.

The chamber offices were soon relocated to a construction trailer with room enough for a receptionist. But there was no plumbing.

"We knew all the public toilets in town where we could stop in for a visit," recalled Suther.

Now, Suther can look back at those early days and laugh. Her retirement from the chamber is only days away, and the laughter is now mixed with a few tears, lots of emotion and plenty of stories to tell.

The Issaquah Chamber of Commerce was certainly not the beginning of Suther's career. But her jobs - both paid and as a volunteer - have the common thread of working with people.

Her first job was selling gift-wrapping and Christmas cards door-to-door when she was only 8 years old. She flipped burgers at the Grizzly Inn when she was a student at Queen Anne High School in Seattle, did some babysitting, worked in retail stores. And her mother's friends paid her to pin curl their hair.

*Retirement Party honoring Suzanne Suther
6 to 8 p.m. Dec. 19*

The barn at Pickering Farm

R.S.V.P. by Dec. 15 by calling 392-7024

By city proclamation, Dec. 19, 2006, will be Suzanne Suther Day in Issaquah.

Later, she worked for a short time at Boeing, and managed the Lovely Lady Slenderizing Salon ("I could do more push ups than my husband!" she recalled) to help save for a down payment on their first home.

It was the job for Grayline Tours that got her headed toward her future with tourism and the chamber.

"I loved that job," she said. "I worked in the lobby of Olympic Hotel selling tickets for sightseeing tours."

Later, she became a tour guide and convention coordinator for the East King County Convention & Visitor Bureau. One of the stops on her guided bus tour was the Issaquah Fish Hatchery.

"That's where I first learned about the hatchery and the salmon cycle," she said. "We made lots of stops, but the salmon was what all the people talked about on the way back to their hotels."

Suther's volunteer work in Issaquah took on a new level of leadership when she was appointed by the mayor to chair the city's Advisory Committee on Tourism in 1980. By then, she had been hired by Boehm's Chocolates to be a tour guide there.

The tourism committee's first challenge was to get upgrades to the hatchery to make it more visitor friendly. Suther paid a visit to the head of the state Fisheries Department in Olympia and convinced him that a change of management would help. Before she knew it, it was done. The new manager actually welcomed questions from the public.

Ten years later, the hatchery was slated for closure due to budget cuts at the state level. By now, Suther was CEO of the chamber and wasn't about to let that happen.

She joined the community fight to convince local state representatives to not only keep it open, but to revamp the facility for educational purposes. She became a charter member of Friends of the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery (FISH) in 1994 and has been on the FISH board of directors since its inception.

The Issaquah Hatchery and what it has become today is just one of the many successes Suther is most proud of during her term as chamber CEO.

Preservation of the historic Alexander House, now home to the chamber, is one of those highlights. Working with local ministers to pull together a community prayer event after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist acts is another.

She worked closely with artist Rolf Goetzinger on research for a limited edition print to commemorate the city's centennial. She coined the phrase "kick ash" to mount a successful campaign to keep a garbage incinerator out of Issaquah. And she sparked the idea of an agora entrance for the library, an idea embraced by the architect.

"I am most proud of my collaboration with other people," Suther said. "It's the realization of what people can do when they come together."

"One note cannot create a symphony. One thread cannot create a tapestry. It's all together that we

make things happen."

Issaquah murals

Suther recalls that getting murals in Issaquah - the first one went up at Darigold - was not as easy as painting a picture on a wall. She and others worked to get a mural policy approved by the city, learn about preservation, decide what was important to depict about the town's history, raise the money and hire a muralist.

"Murals are big in my heart," Suther said.

The city sign code

"I didn't want to see our city ruined with neon lights," Suther said. That spurred her and the chamber on to work with city officials on a revised sign code, one that would enhance the city while encouraging creativity and recognizing the needs of businesses.

Pickering Farm

In 1987, the future of Issaquah was controversial when developers wanted to transform Pickering Farm and the Issaquah Skyport and parachute center into a business park.

Suther said her job was to set aside personal views and bring people together through communication. She set up a panel discussion at a chamber meeting and notes that to this day it was the biggest luncheon crowd the chamber has ever had, with 127 attendees.

Later, Suther and the chamber helped keep Pickering Barn from becoming a recycling center, encouraging a community rental facility instead.

Transportation improvements

Suther is proud of the "can of paint" projects that have been implemented by the chamber's Transportation Oversight Committee. That group has challenged government agencies to make changes to help solve traffic issues, some of them as simple as creating turn lanes with a can of spray paint. Successes include the Frogtown traffic light on East Lake Sammamish Parkway, and the right-hand turn lanes on Interstate 90 off ramps.

QUOTES

"Suzanne's enthusiasm and commitment to Issaquah has been contagious and consistent. She brought her sense of community to the chamber and helped make Issaquah a great place to both live and work."

Leon Kos

City administrator

"Suzanne has created a legacy in Issaquah. She has established the Issaquah Chamber of Commerce as a leader and a well-respected organization on the Eastside. We all love Suzanne and wish her the absolute best in her retirement."

Jim Sloan

2006 chamber president

"One of my favorite memories will be of hearing, from behind closed doors, Suzanne's wonderful infectious laugh."

Robin Kelley

Director of festivals

"Suzanne was instrumental in saving the hatchery and in the formation of FISH. Her devotion to the salmon has never waned. Issaquah owes so much to Suzanne and we are thankful that she is not retiring from FISH!"

Gestin Suttle

FISH executive director

INTERESTING NOTES

- Suzanne was named to the city's Hall of Fame in 1993.
- Suzanne has four children and two grandsons
- Suzanne owns a Boehm's Chocolate retail store in Paulsbo.
- This Salmon Days was the 25th year Suzanne and her children dipped ice cream bars at their Boehm's booth.
- She traveled to the Miss America Pageant twice to show support for the chamber-sponsored Miss Issaquah who was competing nationally.
- In the name of beautification in Issaquah, Suzanne hooked up a hose to a fire hydrant on Gilman Boulevard to water flowers.
- In her days working at Boehm's Chocolates in Issaquah, she used to take trays of candy to the City Council meetings.
- Before joining the chamber, Suzanne went to Hawaii for a tourism class, but found out she knew more than they did.
- Suzanne has sent phantom postcards to businesses pointing out dead plants in planter boxes, dirty bathrooms or poor customer service.
- She is a founding board member of Washington Women in Need.

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