

Wehlers earn Department of Corrections award

Doris and Walt Wehler honored for their volunteer efforts

Wilsonville Spokesman, By: [Josh Kulla](#),

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Photo By: Josh Kulla, Coffee Creek award
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Doris Wehler (pictured) and her late husband Walt were honored by the Oregon Department of Corrections earlier this week for their extraordinary volunteer efforts. From staunch opponent to ardent supporter.

Wilsonville resident Doris Wehler has come full circle in her relationship with the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

Once one of the leading voices against Oregon Department of Corrections' efforts to site Oregon's lone prison for female inmates in Wilsonville, Wehler quickly made her peace with the facility once it became clear her opposition was futile. She went about greeting then-superintendent Joan Palmateer with enthusiasm, eventually finding a kindred spirit who helped John and Sue Ludlow, Wehler and the Wilsonville Rotary Club to establish the groundbreaking Through a Child's Eyes Program.

Now, known more commonly as TACE, the event allows hundreds of inmates to spend time with their families in a relaxed setting twice a year.

"It's really all due to Superintendent Joan Palmateer," Wehler said, relating how Palmateer visited local businesses and service organizations in an effort to overcome people's objections. "She came to a Chamber (of Commerce) luncheon and told us, 'we will be really good neighbors.'"

That was enough to convince the Wehlers, who dove in with both feet.

Now, some eight years later, the Department of Corrections decided to offer another token of good will.

On Monday, Wehler and her late husband, Walt, who died of cancer last December, were honored by the Department of Corrections for that work, which has continued unabated for the past eight years. The Wehlers were jointly named the 2010 D.O.C. Outstanding Citizen of the Year during a ceremony at Coffee Creek that also recognized

national Correctional Officers Week.

Afterward, Wehler was all smiles.

“I’m very surprised,” she said, looking around at Superintendent Nancy Howton and other current staff members. “It’s a great honor, and I really haven’t even been here that long.”

Making the ceremony even more fun for Wehler was the fact it was, in fact, a complete surprise. Thanks to a bit of subterfuge on the part of Howton and other Coffee Creek staffers she never saw it coming.

“We were a bit sneaky about actually getting her out here today,” Howton said after handing Wehler a commemorative plaque and other gifts.

That’s actually an understatement, as Howton soon explained. Originally, Wehler was invited to the morning’s ceremony on the understanding that Howton herself was due for an award of her own. No mention was made of the Citizen of the Year award.

Wehler only realized she was on the receiving end as the ceremony itself unfolded Monday morning.

And even then, Howton was coy in her announcement.

“This year, we’re honoring two people who have been embedded in the community since 1964,” she said.

Howton went through a long list of community organizations the pair, not yet named, were involved with in Wilsonville. It finally began to dawn on Wehler that she might be the one being described, she said, when the Junior Chamber, or Jaycees, were mentioned. She shook her head, smiling as she looked upward.

And when Howton touched on the early opposition to Coffee Creek among some Wilsonville residents, Wehler could only smile further.

“They turned out to be two our biggest supporters,” Howton said. “Their connection to the entire community has brought us many volunteers to Coffee Creek. They give from their hearts without asking anything in return.”

Afterward, Wehler circulated among corrections officers, Rotary members and others, exchanging congratulations.

“When she said ‘The Jaycees,’ that’s what did it,” she said, laughing. “No one here is old enough to have been in the Jaycees except me.”

Probably the single biggest motivator for Wehler to remain active with the women incarcerated at Coffee Creek is the need to help them avoid committing new crimes upon release.

While TACE allows inmates to spend time with their families in a picnic-like setting twice a year, she said, classes and programs offering inmates skills they can use to thrive on the outside also are extremely important in this regard.

Yet, it’s often not enough, given societal stigma and restrictions on convicted felons.

“It’s because everybody needs to work on the recidivism,” Wehler said. “While inmates can learn how to be successful citizens while in prison, they need our help when they’re released. Like anyone starting over, they need jobs and a place to live.

“In Wilsonville, there is not a single apartment manager who will rent to a felon. Getting a job is another huge hurdle.”

And it’s exactly what keeps Wehler working.

“The first superintendent took a big, big risk having us in here,” she said of the first TACE event. “Having a big party in here? That was a big risk. And if even one thing had gone wrong it would have been all over. But that one thing never has gone wrong.”