

Super networker Charlene Woodward champions for mental health



Loren Benoit photo

Charlene Woodward poses for a portrait before entering the Columbia River, Sunday, March 24, in Wenatchee. The Wild Wenatchee Swimmers group is one of many community groups Woodward is involved with. She taught swimming in high school, college and beyond, and currently coaches an adaptive swim team and gives swimming lessons to disabled kids at Eastmont Pool.

Charlene Woodward is a bit like the Kevin Bacon of Wenatchee – if someone has a problem, she is only a couple of degrees of separation from knowing someone local who can help.

Curiosity is the grist for her energetic extrovert mill. She thrives on exchanging ideas, learning something new and hearing people's stories. Friends and family describe her as inquisitive. "She is genuinely interested in people's stories," says her daughter, Sarah Applegate.

In December, Woodward received the Jim Adams Lifetime Achievement Award from the Washington State affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) for her contributions during more than 20 years as a local NAMI volunteer.

Bethany Thrasher, current president of NAMI-North Central Washington, calls Woodward "a true champion of compassion, resilience and dedication."

Woodward and her husband, Larry, own the business Dogwise. They moved to Wenatchee in 1992. She found her way to NAMI through a newspaper ad and started volunteering by creating a newsletter. Her role expanded to serve as a board officer and family-support-group facilitator. She also served as board president for several years.

A frequent spokesperson on mental health topics in media and community forums, Woodward has advocated for increased treatment and services, challenged policy-makers to become better informed and empowered individuals to become NAMI leaders and educators.

She also volunteers at the YWCA thrift store and provides swim lessons to children with disabilities at Eastmont Pool. She's started a local movie club and a cold-water swimming group and collects gently loved tennis shoes for redistribution. She hikes and skis and watches British crime shows, too – while crocheting woolly hats to give away.

In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, Foothills reached out to Woodward to find

out more about her passion for volunteering.

Did you see the Lifetime Achievement Award coming? How did it feel to receive it?

"No, I didn't see it coming. I felt like an Oscar winner because I thought ... 'Oh, there are so many people more worthy than me.' I was surprised and honored to be recognized, and I plan to support NAMI for years to come."

What are some of the changes in mental health treatment you have seen locally as a NAMI volunteer?

"People having access to mental health care through Apple Health has improved the quality of life for many in our community. Increased demand led providers to add more staff and programs to meet the need."

What has been your greatest success as a NAMI volunteer?

"I am especially proud of NAMI North Central Washington's leadership role in training more than 300 law enforcement officers in the Crisis Intervention Team program. This is a 40-hour education program that enables officers to recognize and de-escalate situations where mental health issues may be an issue. More broadly, our local NAMI programs help families and those with mental health issues connect and de-stigmatize mental illness."

What have been some of your most significant challenges as a NAMI volunteer?

"The greatest challenge for me is being aware of the hardships and stigma people face around mental health issues and not feeling discouraged about where we are as a country and community. Everyone wishes there were more psychiatrists and social service providers who could provide treatment in times of need—but here we are.

That is why I believe NAMI is so critical to our community. NAMI support and education programs help individuals and families navigate the often understaffed and overwhelmed healthcare system and learn how to self-advocate."

Given those challenges, what keeps you motivated in your volunteer work?

"What keeps me going as a volunteer is the sense that I am speaking up for and possibly

affecting change in mental health care systems. Failing that goal, I am motivated by the idea that I provide compassionate support to people in their time of need."

What are your mental health practices?

"I've always felt that I had options in life, which I think is a solid foundation for good mental health. I've been fortunate to have support



Provided photo/Charlene Woodward

Woodward was given this lifetime achievement award in December for her volunteer work with the local chapter of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).



Charlene Woodward, right, and Liz Hasslinger wade the Columbia River in Wenatchee, Sunday, March 24. The two are part of a group that began to meet spontaneously in 2020. "Swimming made the pandemic survivable," Woodward says.

from my family of origin and my own family. Not everyone has that. I exercise, try to eat right, and nurture friendships. When I've encountered difficult life situations, I use doctors and counselors to advise me."

You were a court-appointed special advocate (CASA) before joining NAMI. Where did your sense of volunteerism originate?

"I was raised to believe we are all responsible for helping one another. My mother set examples by assisting families of limited means with extras for their children, such as new school uniforms, Christmas gifts and birthday parties."

How have your volunteer activities benefitted you?

"Volunteering has been a positive outlet for my care for others and my naturally inquisitive nature. It's given me a way to connect with others and speak up for those who may not feel empowered to speak for themselves."

You participate in a lot of community activities. Where do you find the energy?

"It's a blessing and a curse! People like me can drive others crazy because we are full of ideas!"

Tell us about the movie group you started. What are your favorite movies?

"I was part of a book club but could never finish the books. So, I started a movie group. We take turns picking the movie and hosting the discussion. One of my favorites is *The Big Easy*, with Dennis Quaid. My favorite line in that movie is [in her best Remy McSwain accent], 'Folks have a certain way o' doin' things down here.'"

Tell us about the adaptive swim lessons.

"A few years ago, a local non-profit, The Brave Warrior Project, recognized that children with physical and intellectual differences were not always able to succeed in standard swimming lessons. A board member who knew I had a background as a Red Cross swimming instructor asked me to help get a program started. I received training in the Swim Angelfish method, which embraces the



Woodward swims in the Columbia, include joint pain relief, mental health

creativity and patience needed to work with a neurodiverse group of swimmers.

I've taught more than 30 children in one-to-one lessons. Our program at Eastmont Pool has grown to include a neurodiverse swim team called the Swim Team Experience, with 15 participants and 10 volunteers. We are seeing such improvement in water safety, swimming skills and socialization."

How do you keep yourself organized with all your activities?

"A big part of my being available to volunteer comes from the stage of life I'm in. I don't have a full-time job, my kids are grown and looking after their own families, and I don't have elderly parents to look after. On a practical level, I am a big believer in decluttering my physical and mental space to free up my time; I use a physical calendar, and if I zone out and forget an appointment, my husband usually reminds me!" 📅



Loren Beroff photo

March 24. She says benefits of cold water immersion with improvement, socialization and more.

Online book retailer Dogwise was Woodward's day job for decades

Though not a canine expert herself, Charlene Woodward found career success locating and publishing the right books for dog lovers.

"I can tell you everything I know about dog training in 5 minutes," she says, good naturedly.

Woodward and her husband, Larry, started Dogwise – an online shop and publishing company based in Wenatchee – in the Seattle area in 1986.

A special-order books seller to schools and libraries at the time, Woodward had a knack for finding unusual books. "If I learned you needed a book on sludge disposal management, I'd get it for you," she says.

Larry, then a banker, offered Woodward's book sleuthing expertise to a colleague who competed in dog shows. The conversation led to Woodward schlepping dog-themed books to dog shows across the region.

She quickly realized that the show folk were the canine experts and she didn't need to be. Instead, the Woodwards designed a catalog and mail-order business to provide niche books and other desired materials to dog experts and pet owners.

When customers lamented being unable to find out-of-print books, Woodward expanded the business by reprinting old titles and publishing 2nd editions of well-loved books whose authors lost their original publisher.

"We currently do from-the-ground-up, sweat-over-every-word, traditional book publishing," she says.

"These books are never going to be 'Gone with the Wind,' but we help create a better end product within our specialty of dog books."

Woodward credits the company's success to being small, flexible and adaptable to the market. At its largest, the company had 21 employees but now employs five.

"We're skinnier than ever," she says. "We owe much of our success to our decision to move to Wenatchee. Our employees were super loyal to us. One started with us when he



Provided photo

Charlene and Larry Woodward pose at Bethesda Fountain in Central Park during a trip to New York in April 2023.

was 17. His hair is graying now."

After moving to Wenatchee in 1992, the business outgrew the couple's home office, so the Woodwards purchased a warehouse on Mission Street in 2008.

When they realized they could move their business online and remain viable, they stopped printing catalogs, saving the cost and work of publishing and mailing catalogs.

Business flourished during the pet-adopting frenzy of the pandemic.

"It was incredible what happened to us as sellers of books on dogs. Like other businesses, we didn't know what would happen. It could have easily gone the other way. People needed how-to books. They can buy from Amazon and choose from thousands of titles or go to Dogwise and get expert advice on what titles are best for their experience," Woodward says.

The Woodwards still own the business, but their son, Nate Woodward, now manages it.



Sharon Jordan photo