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PEOPLE

Retirement doesn't slow this volunteer

Gil Thurston stays active working on many issues

MICHELLE NOLAN
FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Gil Thurston recalls helping Birchwood Elementary students cross old Highway 99 when he was a safety patrol member 70 years ago.

Some of those kids, now senior citizens, can now find Thurston helping negotiate a safer path for them as a volunteer with Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access.

Thurston, who turns 82 on April 4, has stayed busy with the Whatcom County School Retirees' Association since he retired 21 years ago following 26 years as a principal in Bellingham schools. He's one of 25 active members who together average 730 hours a month in volunteer work. They celebrated School Retirees Week this week.

Thurston and his wife, Inge, have four children and six grandchildren. A 1942 graduate of Bellingham High School, Thurston served in the Marines during World War II, then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Washington University.

He's a former president of the Association of Washington School Principals and served on the boards of several national and state education organizations.

Question: How did the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access begin?

Answer: We're a nonprofit organization that came into existence about three years ago out of a committee funded by the St. Luke's Foundation. It developed out of a need created when local doctors began to stop taking new Medicare patients because the reimbursement rates were so low. I joined in the second year as a consumer advocate. I had a background in this because I had served as Washington state health education coordinator for AARP.

Q: What role does the alliance play?

A: We're a nonpartisan lobbying group. We're advocating for changes so doctors will receive decent reimbursement from the government. We're also trying to see that doctors who take Medicare patients can get benefits such as B&O tax reductions. This is an important issue. We're



seeing people going for emergency care at St. Joseph Hospital because they can't get a doctor through Medicare.

Q: You help gain health-care access for people other than seniors, too, right?

A: We provide free and confidential telephone consultation and one-on-one assistance for people of all ages in Whatcom County. We want to help people understand insurance options and to get doctors, so they can get the care they need when they need it. We have a wonderful project going with Ferndale School District to find out which children don't have health insurance and to help them. And we're working on recruiting doctors, specialists who will take some people without insurance.

Q: This is quite a list of your volunteer activities past and present. What's your work with the South Hill Neighborhood Association?

A: I'm a member of the land-use committee. My big concern is that we're growing too fast without adequate planning. I'm especially concerned about high-rise condos being built without anything to accommodate children's needs. I'm just saying to built 'em right, the way they have in Vancouver (B.C.), where condos have playrooms for children.

Q: And your work with the Northwest Regional Council for Senior Services?

A: It's an association of four county governments. We serve older and disabled people and provide several types of care and meals.

Q: You had quite a career as a principal, serving seven schools and finishing at the school where you were a kid, Birchwood.

A: I often thought about that journey when I was principal at Birchwood. I felt I'd come full circle. I was principal at Geneva, Silver Beach, Roosevelt, Parkview, Lowell and also Roeder for a year when we had a school there.

Q: Why did you move around so much?

A: I always felt if you can't accomplish all your goals in five years, you're never going to accomplish them. You lose some of the challenge. I liked to try to initiate things that were new and different. I really enjoyed having a new slate