

Frugal life left boon for charity



Photo by Bob Pennell

Mick Johnson, family services director for the Salvation Army, was surprised to learn that the man who came around for free bread may have left the charity a large amount of money.

Medford man started saving during youth

By JONEL ALECCIA

A self-described miser who drank outdated milk, lived in an unheated house and held up his second-hand pants with a bungee cord has left a \$9 million legacy that will benefit Southern Oregon social service agencies.

Gordon Elwood, 79, of Medford, died in October, leaving a \$10 million estate built on frugality and investments from 46 years as a self-taught TV technician.

About \$9 million has been directed toward the Gordon Elwood Foundation, board members announced Thursday. Organizers will make grants to agencies in four Southern Oregon counties, including the YMCA, the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross and nonprofit organizations that benefit cats.



Elwood

"Oh, man, that would make such a difference. I have to beg for everything I get," said Mick Johnson, family services director for the Salvation Army office in Medford.

About \$50,000 will be available for immediate distribution, with plans to increase grants to about \$400,000 annually starting next year, said Robert Hutchins, Elwood's longtime financial adviser.

"Gordon was a very bright, articulate person but he literally was a miser," said Hutchins, who managed Elwood's affairs for more than 20 years. "He didn't want anything that was yours, but he certainly saved what was his."

News of Elwood's fortune surprised such people as Johnson, who knew him as a shabbily dressed figure pedaling a bicycle across Jackson County, collecting bottles and cans for deposits.

"He would come in here and I would think he was really poor," Johnson recalls. "I would give him a loaf of bread. Sometimes I would give him a little jar of jelly. I feel so silly. I didn't really know he was that rich."

Even Elwood's family was unclear about the extent of his wealth. His sister, Doreen Keener, 81, of Medford, gasped when told the size of his estate.

"Ten million! That's quite a lot," she said. "He always admitted he was a miser."

Keener said her brother's road to riches began in childhood, when their father gave them money to invest in a grade school savings plan.

"Gordon started then. It launched him on this fortune, I guess," Keener said. "I took mine and used it on our honeymoon."

Elwood, who lived in a modest West Medford house, amassed his fortune through self-denial, careful savings and a shrewd understanding of stocks and other investments. He favored oil companies, particularly Chevron, because the firms don't pay taxes on the oil until it's pumped from the ground.

"He was very knowledgeable about tax advantages and how to make the most from an investment," Hutchins said.

Elwood's estate provides a trust for his two children, Karl Elwood and Kristy Jo Schults, both of Medford.

The bulk of it, however, will go toward agencies that affected Elwood as a boy growing up in Medford. His generosity toward the American Red Cross can be traced to World War II, when Elwood and his father repaired radios for the organization.

"We met some real nice ladies there and it seemed like they did so much," Elwood told his foundation's board of directors.

He had a long-standing affection for cats and often adopted felines from area shelters. Elwood once trained a cat to ride with him on his bicycle. He harbored so many cats at his Orange Street home that neighbors complained, Hutchins said.

Elwood slept in a sleeping bag, wore secondhand clothes and ate free holiday meals. When Hutchins' bank served refreshments, Elwood stuffed his pockets full of cookies.

He did appreciate fine automobiles, particularly Mercedes and BMW models, said Gary Ames, a salesman for Lithia Motors in Medford. Elwood was a frequent showroom visitor who would appear in shabby clothes and sandals to chat about the intricacies of automobile technology.

"When you first met Gordon, you had to look beyond the clothes," Ames said. "From Gordon I learned that you never know what you're dealing with. That's a good message to everyone. Everyone has worth, but how much you may not know at the time."

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