



Chicken Friday Christmas

by Joe Heisler

There was no mention of the **White Center Food Bank** today in The Seattle Times report on hardships and headwinds facing small nonprofits though they lost \$50K in government funding this year, a perfect case-in-point for the newly released Nonprofit Research Collaborative findings. ¹

The cuts come as community needs increase, but the volunteer-driven organization is responding to challenges with extended hours and expanded services. The **Baby Pantry** is just one example and today a dozen children were among those lined up outside, braving the cold and waiting for doors to open at 1 p.m. Volunteers readied provisions and took stations inside.

With only two paid staffers, the WCFB coordinates 20,000 volunteer-hours to serve more than 60,000 people a year.

“You have to understand,” said **Executive Director Rick Jump**, “Our average donation is \$25, maybe \$50, and we do have generous donors who give \$50 every month. So when Irish came in this morning with \$4,100, we were just blown away.”

That’s **Irish McKinney**, a charismatic barrel-chested mountain of a man, full white beard prominent, with a commanding voice and easy smile — his better-half’s patch says, *‘my old man is one bad apple.’*

Marjorie and Irish keep four motorcycles, including the vintage ‘59 Panhead Harley he bought

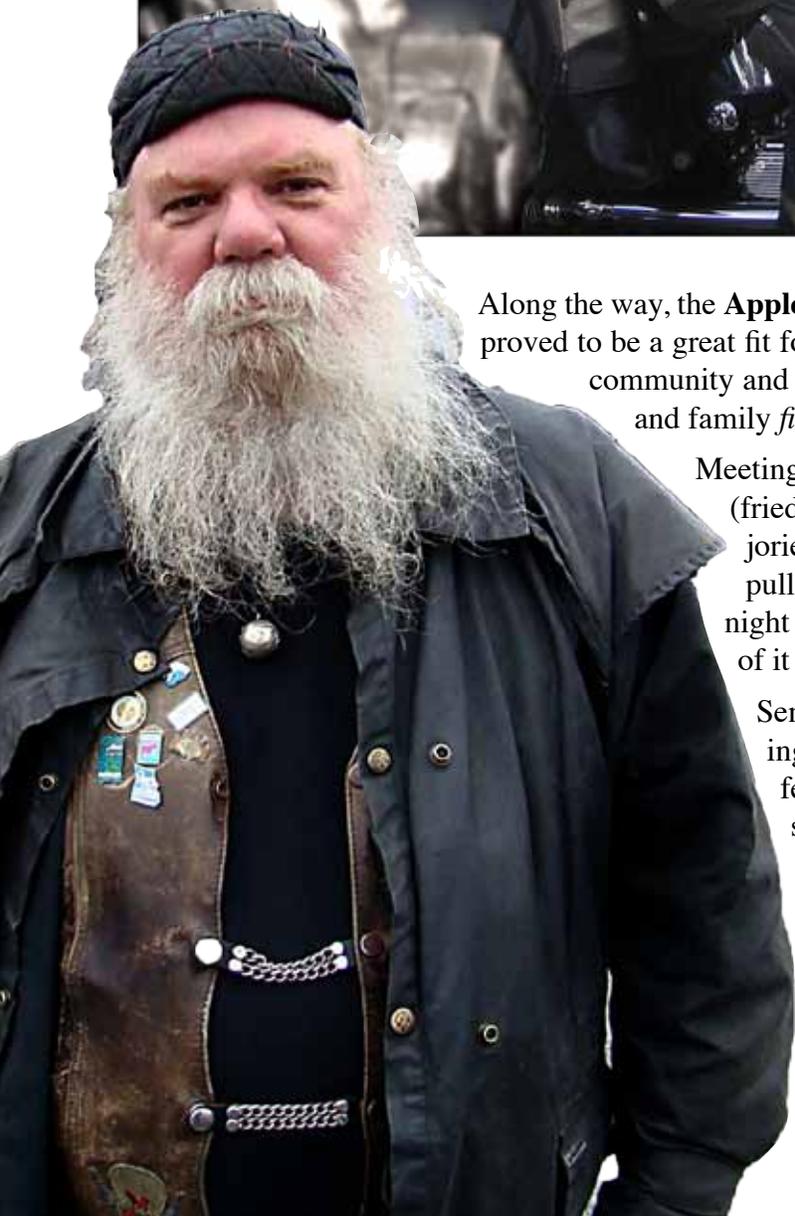
fresh out of the Army in Minneapolis (1974), and “rode back to Seattle by way of Dallas.” He knew the biker clubs of the time, but took a detour for school and a year as a VISTA volunteer. Irish earned his degree from the University of Puget Sound in 1980 as a business major.

As a pro sound tech, Irish found a path that led to work with Arlo Guthrie, Leo Kotke, David Crosby, Ann and Nancy Wilson, Jerry Miller of Moby Grape, Mudhoney, Alice in Chains, and The Presidents of the United States of America among others.

Of his time at the bygone Backstage in Ballard, Irish recalled, “It was a *third line* venue that booked a lot of acts either on their way up or on their way down.”

There were many great encounters, but after ten years the crowd seemed to be getting younger, so Irish shifted gears again, and as a top producing Enrolled Agent for a regional H&R Block office, stayed for thirteen years before opening his own successful practice, **Top Hat Taxes™**. “They took a chance on me,” he said, reflecting with a smile, “I’ve looked like this for a long time.”





Along the way, the **Apple Dumpling Gang (ADG)**, a regional motorcycle club, proved to be a great fit for Irish. Predominantly veterans with a strong sense of community and belonging like a lot of other clubs, but “they put work and family *first*,” he said. “And that made the difference.”

Meeting friends at **The Barrel Tavern** on Friday evenings (fried chicken special) became a tradition for Irish and Marjorie through the years, and one that continues today — pulling tables together to accommodate all, and making a night of it. In 2008 they made a wonderful Christmas party of it for legions of friends.

Sensing an opportunity to leverage the good feeling, they decided to underwrite a holiday party to help feed people in need. So with **Top Hat Taxes™** as sponsor, and partners in **The Barrel Tavern** and **Rat City ABATE** ² to *host* and *post* the event respectively, **Chicken Friday Christmas** was born.

Marjorie reports that the first ‘official’ **Chicken Friday Christmas** in 2009 brought in **\$1,300** for charity. The net reached **\$2,000** in 2010. *But this year was extraordinary.*



On party night The Barrel sparkled. Vincente's team tended the gorgeous buffet throughout the night and the food was incredible. Diners filled long, elegant banquet tables and volunteers sold raffle tickets in the aisles.

It was standing-room-only before long. From a festooned head table facing the room, Irish gestured or said something that hushed the boisterous crowd at once.

He introduced a 'brother,' as bikers tend to regard and call each other, who delivered a heartfelt benediction to bowed heads nodding in agreement, followed by polite applause.

Taking the microphone, Irish continued with recognition for troops returning from Iraq and gratitude for

their service punctuated by long moments of silence and reflection for the fallen. This was the weekend troops were coming home en masse — and the gravity of sentiment of Vietnam-era veterans who faced a much different homecoming was lost on no one.

"Let's feed some people!," Irish's booming baritone filled the room, without the mic this time, and to greater effect. "What are we doing?," he bellowed, and the crowd responded in unison, "Feeding People!"

Next up was the amazing Orville Johnson to play a few sets of acoustic blues freeing Irish to work the room — he was on all night and the crowd was with him all the way, even when he doubled-down and took to reciting holiday poems. It was an amazing production, lots going on and no lulls in the action.

And as the Third Annual **Chicken Friday Christmas** gave way to Saturday morning, all left happy and entertained, feeling good for doing good.

"Please just say how grateful we are, how truly grateful." The food bank director's refrain hung in the air as he searched for words — he was speaking for a lot of great volunteers who work very hard every day. And for those in need, on their urgent behalf, he was speaking for them.

But Irish never was in it for recognition. He agreed to talk, but largely to thank a lot of people for the hard work and support that made it successful. "**Dana and Deanna** (sisters, proprietors of The Barrel) are incredible. They sold ribbons all month and exceeded all expectations. They were not passive, they made it happen."

When he stopped by The Barrel early Saturday morning it wasn't for congratulations, just some help to deliver two truck loads of brand new toys to **Childhaven™** in Burien. "And it took everything I had to get there." But that's another story.

He's not a proud man, but a lot of people are very proud of him. And so it goes — *sometimes the good guys wear black...*

1. Donna Blankenship, "**Economic recovery slow for US nonprofits**" *The Seattle Times* (AP) December 19, 2011

2. **Rat City ABATE:** (A Brotherhood Against Totalitarian Enactments) Seattle chapter of the nationwide motorcycle legislative awareness and activist organization. Marjorie and Irish are state officials of **ABATE of Washington**.