

# Retiree gives Shriners Hospitals in Portland \$1 million

by John Foyston, The Oregonian

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Torsten Kjellstrand/The Oregonian

George Ruhberg, 93, who has been a volunteer at Shriners Hospital for Children in Portland since 1994, had included a bequest for it in his will. But the retired Marine Corps officer and utility accountant decided to act while alive.

George Ruhberg had no problem writing "one million dollars" on one of his recent checks. After all, he said, that is shorter than a more quotidian sum such as "six hundred and ninety-seven dollars and 67 cents."

"But getting 'Shriners Hospitals for Children, Portland' in that line they give you to write on a check," he said, "that took some doing. I had to practice that a few times."

It wasn't the first big donation the retired Marine Corps chief warrant officer and former corporate accountant has made. A stack of certificates in his apartment in a Garden Home retirement community includes a plaque from the Oregon Scottish Rite clinics recognizing contributions of \$100,000 or more, and a Department of Veteran Affairs certificate lauds his 3,269 hours of volunteer service to veterans over 12 years.

In fact, Ruhberg said, he has given the Scottish Rite clinics \$220,000 over the years and an additional \$52,000 to DeMolay, the Masonic-sponsored youth organization. "Oh, and I also bought a \$62,000 organ for my church, Beaverton Methodist."

But the million-dollar check to Shriners was the biggest.



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Writing a \$1 million check wasn't hard for George Ruhberg, who saved and invested during his military and corporate careers. But fitting the recipient, Shriners Hospital for Children, on one line was not so easy.

"We knew that George had made a provision in his will," said Shriners Hospital spokeswoman Kay Weber-Ekeya, "so we were thrilled at his gift, which will become part of our capital campaign for the new addition to the building."

### **Portland a bright spot**

The Portland campaign is a bright spot in an otherwise grim outlook for the Shriners nationwide. Officials said in April that the organization is siphoning \$1 million a day from its endowment to balance the budget for 22 hospitals in North America and that up to a quarter of them may be closed.

Weber-Ekeya said Portland's 66,000-square-foot, \$74 million addition is scheduled to open in a year and will provide four operating theaters (though there is money to outfit only three initially) and a new orthotics and prosthetics department. It also will allow the hospital to make all rooms private or semi-private.

Hospital officials have offered Ruhberg the honor of having his name on the new entry plaza or one of the operating suites, and the hospital board will give him the Dream Makers Legacy Award at its June 22 meeting, Weber-Ekeya said.

"George has been a volunteer at the hospital since 1994," she said, "and he still leads tours -- talk about the millionaire next door, he's really the sweetest man."

When Ruhberg told the hospital a couple of months ago that he had decided to give the money before he died instead of leaving it in his will, development director Mark Thoreson told him to have his broker contact Shriners headquarters in Tampa, Fla., to arrange a funds transfer.

"But he said, 'Hold on, I want to write a check,'" Thoreson said. "And I totally understand that: I wanted to make the transfer safe and he wanted the thrill of writing that check."

### **Memorial Day gift**

Thoreson, hospital officials and Shriners formally accepted the check on Memorial Day in the community room at Ruhberg's retirement community, in front of Ruhberg's fellow residents.

That check was the result of a lifetime of service and thrift that now seem sadly obsolete.

"Aren't you going to ask me about how I got the money?" he asked. "I saved it. I never have been a spender, and when I got out of the Marine Corps in 1961 after 26 years, I became an accountant at Pacific Power & Light because I had always wanted a white-collar job, and my wife and I got by fine on that paycheck, so I banked my pension from the Marine Corps and invested it."

Ruhberg was born near Milton-Freewater in March 1916 -- 30 years before the names of what were two separate communities were merged -- and grew up on a farm on the south fork of the Walla Walla River. His family grew their own food, and Ruhberg said that though there was very little money, they ate well and he never thought of his family as poor.

"And that was in the Depression, too," he said, "when a penny was real money. You could buy yourself a piece of black licorice that big with a penny, but I was more likely to save that penny, because we were eating well and I didn't need licorice."

He joined the Marine Corps in 1935 and was soon shipped off to China, then back to Astoria, where he met his wife, Dorothy -- she died in 2002 -- about 1940.

He saw service in World War II in the South Pacific, much of it as part of Adm. William Halsey Jr.'s entourage, though Ruhberg points out quickly that he himself "was just a peon."

He also served in Korea, landing at Inchon and taking part in the winter battle of Chosin Reservoir -- the Frozen Chosin of Marine Corps legend.

"That was cold," he said, "but you quickly learned that you had to think of your men first before you worried about yourself."

### **Tired of golf**

Ruhberg seems to never have forgotten that lesson. As a four-decade Mason, a member of the Scottish Rite and a Shriner, service is an integral part of his life. Besides volunteering at Shriners Hospital, he's also involved in the community through Meals-On-Wheels; through the SMART program, where he helps children learn to read; and through his volunteer work at the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"I'm a Mason, and I believe in charity," he said. "I practice the code of Masonry, and I like to help people."

"Besides," he said, "when I retired after 18 years at Pacific Power & Light in 1980, everyone told me I should relax. So I took up golfing with some guys, and it wasn't long before I got so tired of it that I started volunteering."

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