

“Make a Difference Where You Live”: Kitsap Community Leader Kathryn XX, 102

For Kathryn XX, life has been a great adventure full of family, community, nature, and education. In 1931, she was the lone bank teller in a western Oregon bank that was robbed, and was tied up in the vault (“back when they used rope because duct tape didn’t exist”). During World War II, she was one of the community volunteers who took shifts in the watch tower erected on a school ground. She is also one of the charter members of the Kitsap County League



of Women Voters, and she has had the great pleasure of traveling to all 50 states and 21 foreign countries – making some of those trips after experiencing vision loss. But one of her adventures for which she may be best known is a founder of the Silverdale branch of the Kitsap Library System – back before the library system existed.

Starting the libraries was complicated since so much of Kitsap County was unincorporated at the time. “We worked to try to get library service into the county, but we had to provide a tax base. We had to organize as the Kitsap County library district in order to have the tax base to provide books for libraries,” Kathryn remembers. Each local community, in order to get that county service, had to build or provide their own library. “Since Silverdale was unincorporated and had no tax base still, we had to provide library services through volunteer help. Our first so-called ‘station’ was in the basement of the Methodist Church in a Sunday school room!”

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During World War II, the government had to build barracks and other military support buildings on the school grounds in Silverdale. At the end of the war, most of the military buildings reverted to the school district, and Kathryn’s group was allowed to move their fledgling library into one of the 16 by 16 foot buildings. The new library served both the community of Silverdale and the students in the school building next door. “We were constantly building schools, and the original idea was to have a library in the school. But the community grew so fast that by the time the school building was finished, the library room had to be used as a classroom. So our little station provided library service to the school,” she explained. Kathryn was instrumental in fostering a culture of philanthropy for the library. “The floor was just rough wood with knotholes in it, and ladies would get their heels stuck in the holes – so I put a graph up on the bulletin board, and for 10 cents people could buy a tile. We would brush in the squares of the graph to keep track for when we had enough tiles to refinish the floor so people wouldn’t fall anymore,” she laughed.

In 1969, Kathryn and her husband, Ray, led the campaign to raise \$13,000 to build a brand new library building. The new Silverdale Library was dedicated to Ray, who passed away in 1973.

Despite the fact that Kathryn has Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD), books and reading are still an important part of her life. What types of reading does she enjoy? “I’m at an age where I don’t have to improve myself. Whatever’s done is done,” she joked. “But I enjoy mysteries and adventure stories, and I like true experience things. Some of them are good and some are not so good. I read a wide variety of things.” Shortly after being diagnosed with AMD, she started using audiobooks regularly, including the most recent digital reader system used by the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library. She also purchased a CCTV machine years ago, tastefully placed in her living room unobtrusively. “I use it some, but what I really need now is a handheld one I can keep in my purse. I go out to dinner and different places, and lots of entertainment, and I thought that if I carried something in my purse, I could read a menu or a program for an activity.” She pulled out a loaned stand magnifier to try from XX. “I haven’t had much practice still. I’ve been having too many great parties instead,” she laughed. Kathryn just turned 102 in early August.

More recently, Kathryn’s hearing has begun to degenerate. “I find that’s harder on me than the vision loss because you’re out of the loop if you can’t hear. I’m OK one-on-one, but hearing aids won’t help with any group things.” When people lose their hearing in addition to vision loss, it can be a frustrating situation since most adaptive skills involve using the other senses. Kathryn seems to be doing well adapting: “That’s why we have the five senses; they help each other!” she explained. “I do a lot of seeing through feeling. I am a messy eater; I feel the food with my fingers.”

“Memory is probably one of her saving graces,” explains her son.

Kathryn’s Bremerton apartment boasts an incredible 180 degree view of downtown Bremerton, Sinclair Inlet and the bays, Port Orchard, and the Olympic mountain range. She moved into the unit 18 years ago, long before she needed assistance due to her eye sight. “There were other apartments available at the time, but I knew that if I wanted this apartment with this view, I had better grab it. So I moved before I had to; I mean, I could still see and drive,” she explained. “I clearly remember the view because I lived here when I could still see. That’s why I moved here early—so I know the view is there. I can hear the ferries come in.”

Kathryn’s advice to others who are experiencing vision loss is to foster and maintain your activities and relationships. “Don’t give up on the organizations or clubs you belong to. I’m fortunate that I have friends who are willing to keep up with me and take me places, to meeting and events,” she explained. “A lot of people, when they can’t drive anymore, they lose interest and just don’t go anywhere anymore. They think the end has come.”

“Have fun! Make a difference where you live, wherever you are.”

Connecting with XX: Orientation and Mobility Specialist Karen XX

XX's Orientation and Mobility specialist Karen, often lovingly referred to as "Karen the Cane Lady" by clients, is celebrating her 22nd year with the agency this summer. She had just graduated from the Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX, with a degree in Orientation and Mobility, and accepted the position with the agency (then called XX) having never even visited Seattle before. "I packed up my cat and myself, and whatever I could fit into my little Ford Escort, and I drove out west to Seattle. It took three and a half days, and I drove straight to the office before checking into a hotel. Nobody was here. Most of my co-workers were out in the field," she remembers. It was a big risk to take a job sight-unseen and move to a part of the country where she had never been before, but it turned out to be a great move: "I love my colleagues, and I love my clients. I'm very happy here."



Karen was not sure what she wanted to do after high school, so she did what many young people did in 1980 – "tooled around." She spent time living on the beach and surfing in Mexico, and lived in Vail, CO, for four years working at the ski resort. "I had a ski pass and a locker at the bottom of the mountain to store all my gear so I could be the first one in the lift line in the morning. I would often ski until 20 minutes before I started my shift in the lodge. I would literally start waiting tables with my face red from skiing all day. It was just great fun."

Karen also tried scuba diving as a sport for a period of time. Several of her best friends are diving instructors and taught her how to use the equipment and proper techniques in the safety of a swimming pool. "After that first one-hour session, we threw the gear into the jeep, parked at the beach, and we went diving. I was incredibly nervous, but I was with my best friend who held my hand the whole time," she explains. She had some incredible experiences while scuba diving, including one exhilaratingly unnerving experience in Costa Rica. "We were surrounded by 15 or 20 mud sharks, which I thought was really cool. When we were all done and back on the boat, everyone was telling me 'wow, Karen, you were so brave diving with all those sharks.' I didn't think there was anything dangerous about it, because I trusted that my friends wouldn't put me in a dangerous situation," she said. "I wasn't scared at all, but apparently the others in the group, who were all very experienced, were keeping a close eye on me!" she laughed. "Those sharks were longer than me, and I thought 'wow, this is really cool.' Ignorance is bliss; I didn't know."

Eventually, Karen decided to go into the field of blind rehabilitation. "I didn't want to work in an office pushing paper. I get to be outside moving around every day, helping people living with vision loss maintain and increase their independence in the home and community." She often gets compliments on her ability to teach mobility skills, but she responds by telling them that it takes a good student to be a good teacher. "The teacher can only do so much. I cannot instill confidence; one must gain confidence with practice. I can teach the skills, but confidence comes

from within. It's motivation, desire, determination, and confidence that leads one to succeed," she explains.

What does she do when a client does not have these internal motivators or is resistant to learning orientation and mobility? "I refer to J, a fellow Orientation and Mobility specialist, or the social work team, M or K, for assistance. You can't make someone do something they're not ready to do, either physically or emotionally," she said. "When you are talking about using a cane and moving from point A to point B, and crossing roadways and being amongst other people and motorists – that is all just too serious to make someone do if they are not ready. It is important to follow the cues of the clients and what they can handle learning at the moment." If someone is not ready to work with Karen yet, she always makes sure they know they can come to her later. "It's hard to do things that are going to take effort and work, and hard work gets us where we are. If you don't have that determination, maybe you will get it later, and I will always be here. In these cases, I try to get some of the basics in just to make sure they will be safe in their immediate environment."

What has changed in her field since starting 22 years ago? "The concept of using a long white cane has not changed at all. Technology has boomed with the development of talking GPS and other types of mobility aids, which can be used to increase one's ability to orient oneself while using a white cane or guide dog. And even if you have all the technology in the world, if your vision is low enough, you cannot depend on that technology alone. You have to have a cane or guide dog. The technology is only to enhance one's ability to get around," she explained.

Karen would love to see her clients participating in the XX event. "Bring a sighted guide to join you," she advises. "To quote George Burns: 'Walk: it's good for you and it's free.' Walking is something that everyone takes for granted. Everyone! Imagine standing up from a chair, walking to the kitchen to pour a glass of iced tea, and walking to the garden bench to sit under the shade tree. No problem, unless you have a bone, joint, cardio, or respiratory condition... or vision loss."

As an O&M Specialist, Karen is also one of XX's experts in fall prevention, making it one of her top priorities when working with clients. "I tell my clients that the white cane to a person who is visually impaired is like the safety gear to a skateboarder. You wear a helmet, and you wear elbow and kneepads, because if you fall and hit your head or your elbow you can injure yourself. The white cane is exactly the same," she explains. "One can attempt to walk without the assistance of a mobility device, but if one does not see the step and takes a fall, the chances are good one is going to hurt oneself." In addition, Karen points out other fall prevention factors: rugs, cords, proper lighting, having a mobility device, and so on. "Take the time you need. Don't hurry to get to the phone or to stand up suddenly. These little tricks help prevent falls."

If you need assistance with Orientation and Mobility, please call XX at (800) XX.

Go Outside!: Celebrate National Park and Recreation Month this July

Did you know that the month of July was designated National Park and Recreation Month in 1985? Those who live in Western Washington are lucky to be surrounded by such incredible natural beauty and outdoor spaces – from the mountains to the sound and beyond. Below are some suggestions to inspire you to get outside and “Get Wild” this month! Please call your local city or county parks office for additional ideas.

[**Oral Hull Foundation for the Blind**](#) is a special 22-acre forested property in Sandy, Oregon, designed as a retreat space specifically for those with vision loss and their guests. The park is just 30 miles east of Portland, and is nestled in the foothills of Mt. Hood and on the Sandy River. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Oral Hull. This is a destination retreat, with 48 double-occupancy dorm-style rooms, a hot tub, indoor heated swimming pool, sensory gardens, fishing pond, a Braille and audiobook library, ¼ mile track with raised railings, and the Rainbow Lodge for meetings and socializing. There is a wide range of activities appealing to everyone: white water rafting, kayaking, crafting, bungee jumping, zip lining, sculpting, creative writing, and group excursions to the Oregon coast, Portland attractions, and the sternwheeler on the Columbia River.

[**Everett Lions Park**](#) is the first park in the country to utilize a free web-based [ClickAndGo Wayfinding system](#) to assist users with vision loss. Park visitors can download the customized and mobility-friendly walking directions onto their smart phones or MP3 players, use a text-to-speech reader on their devices, or call a toll-free number for voice narration. In addition, there are large Braille and tactile maps at each of the entrances to the park.

[**Audubon BirdLoop at Marymoor Park**](#) in Redmond, is a looped path that runs through grassy meadows, thick forest, and calm marsh, and is home to over 200 different species of birds. Rest your eyes and take in the incredible auditory experience of the bird symphony. Please note that the only paved and ADA-certified part of the loop is the section near the mansion.

There are also [Reflexology Paths](#) at **Marymoor Park**, **Steve Cox Memorial Park** in White Center, and the **132nd Square Park** in Kirkland. These reflexology paths create a tactile experience unlike any other: users walk on a path of natural stones without shoes on so that the stones will stimulate different acupressure points in the feet. Reflexology is thought to reduce stress and increase circulation in the body. There are handrails for users to steady themselves while walking on the stones. What a great opportunity to kick off your shoes and enjoy the sun!

[**Tennant Lake Interpretive Center**](#) in Ferndale boasts a 624-acre park with wetlands, fields, and the award-winning Fragrance Garden. There is a 50-foot observation tower for visitors to watch the wildlife of the wetlands, with the bonus accessibility feature of a television monitor at the base of the tower that allows visitors to pan, tilt, and zoom the video camera around the wetlands. There is also an award-winning fragrance garden next to the interpretive center with an ADA-accessible path, raised beds, and a unique plant identification system for Braille users. Visitors are encouraged to touch and smell the flowers in this garden!

Adjacent to Tennant Lake is [Hovander Homestead Park](#). Some of the features of this 350 acre space includes the original 1903 farmhouse and 60-foot high barn. The historic house is still furnished with the furniture brought over from Sweden by the architect Hovan Hovander and his children, and the attic has been turned into a cultural interpretive center with various historical collections (such as toys from 100 years ago). Please note that the farmhouse is not wheelchair accessible. In the barn area, visitors can feed and interact with a wide assortment of farm animals, including geese, ducks, chickens, turkeys, rabbits, goats, and cattle. Last month, the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation awarded the park for the county's stewardship in maintaining this assemblage of 100-year-old house, barn, and other outbuildings and conveying a sense of what an early 20th century farm experience was like in Whatcom County.

[The Olympic Sculpture Park](#), on the waterfront of downtown Seattle, offers a fun urban park experience for those with vision loss. Even though it is a facility of the Seattle Art Museum, entrance to the park is free. The paths are ADA-accessible, with a gently graded slope from the upper section of the park down to the water level. There are two groups of sculptures that you can touch, both by local artist Roy McMakin. "Love & Loss" is on the water level and incorporates seating, live trees, and a lighted ampersand feature. On the upper part of the park, just to the east of the railroad, are three pieces grouped together made of steel and bronze: "Bench," "Chair," and "Banker's Box." For those with some remaining vision intact, the other sculptures may be large enough to be seen. Plus, the park can be an urban auditory treat with the busy railroad cutting under the path, the water of Elliott Bay hitting the shore, and the ferries and other large ships passing by.

Don't forget that you have may close access to a wonderful outside space – **just outside your door**. Make even the smallest trips outside an enjoyable outing. If you have the space, place an outdoor chair near your mailbox so that you can stop to enjoy the feel of the sun on your face and listen to the birds chirping, dogs barking, or the "beep beep" of the delivery truck down the street. Don't be afraid to smell and touch flowers and plants in your neighborhood (but beware of thorns and prickly plants!).

We spend so much time indoors during the winter months, it's time to get outside and take a few deep breaths. Please call XX toll-free at (800) XXX-XXXX for more information about Orientation & Mobility assistance. Happy summer!

Kelsi Watson's Incredible Year of New Friends and New Experiences after the Expo

At the middle lane of noisy, bustling Roxbury Lanes in White Center stands Kelsi XX in her maroon "Roarin' Dragonz" bowling shirt, holding her purple bowling ball in front of her chest and concentrating on her swing. Lined up with the central arrow on the floor under her feet, Kelsi takes one, two, three steps forward and releases her ball at the top of her swing. The ball travels straight down the lane with remarkable speed and connects with the first pin. Strike! Her team mates and the bowlers in the lanes on either side of her cheer and reach for her hands in celebration. Kelsi will bowl another two strikes before the end of the day. She is a remarkable bowler considering she only learned to play last summer; she bowls better and with more accuracy than most casual bowlers with 20/20 vision.



Kelsi discovered her new passion for bowling through connections she made attending XX's, in 2011. "I met so many people from attending the expo," Kelsi explained. "I met so many friends, learned from the speakers and vendors, and found new networks that I didn't know existed before." It was through a new friend with whom she connected at the expo that she even learned to bowl. "I didn't know what the expo was or what it was about, but I thought 'XX helped me

before, so I should check this out.'"

Kelsi first started working with XX after experiencing an aneurism that left her partially-sighted. One of the people with whom she worked was Karen, a XX orientation and mobility specialist ("Karen the cane lady"). "Karen got me my cane and came to my house to help me out," Kelsi said. She fondly remembers Karen teaching her how to safely walk her beloved black lab, Saylor. "Karen connected me with everything XX had to offer, even encouraging me to see Dr. XX in the clinic. Because I trusted Karen, I paid attention to the expo flyer in the mail and decided to give it a try."

She first started making friends and connections before she even disembarked from the DART bus at the Lynnwood Convention Center. "I started meeting people and everyone was chatting on the Access bus through Seattle, and I started talking with my new good friend Glen when we transferred to the DART in Snohomish County. Glen was the last one to get off the bus in Lynnwood, so I walked with him to the registration table. As we walked, everyone was yelling 'Hi, Glen!' to us, and I thought, 'Oh, I picked the right person to make friends with!'" remembered Kelsi with a laugh. "Oh boy, did we have a good time at the expo!"

Kelsi remembers the expo fondly as a day of learning, sharing, and connecting. "Both of the speakers were excellent and clearly specialists in their fields," she said. "They didn't talk in 'doctor-ese' at all. They spoke to us as real people, which I really appreciated." Kelsi even had the opportunity to talk with and thank one of the speakers personally when she saw him later at the expo.

The vendor fair was equally important to Kelsi, for she had the opportunity to learn about guide dogs, recreation activities, assistive computers, and other tools and devices to make her life easier. She was very glad to see the [Washington Talking Book and Braille Library \(WTBBL\)](#) table because she had a brand-new digital audio player at home that she wasn't sure how to use. "I had one of those old machines before, where you had to flip the tapes over to keep listening. It was a pain. When I got the new digital one, I opened it but didn't know how to use it." The WTBBL table had a model similar to Kelsi's new one and they taught her how to operate it right there at the expo. "It's great to read books again. Last year, I read *Hard Driving: The Wendell Scott Story* (by Brian Donovan) about NASCAR's first African-American race car driver, and it was excellent," Kelsi shared.

Kelsi had a remarkable day at the expo last year, but what happened after she returned home is even more remarkable. The friends she met helped her connect with a strong network of social and recreational opportunities. She met and became friends with Gaylen of the [South King Council of the Blind](#), who introduced her to the other council members. "The South King Council of the Blind has been a wonderful resource for me; there are a lot of neat people there," Kelsi said. The group meets every month in Federal Way, and Kelsi feels lucky to have met them through Gaylen.

And then there is the bowling. "It was my new friend Glen who encouraged me to keep being active and involved in the community. Glen used to be a bowling instructor when he had his sight, and when he got back into it, he drug me in, too," Kelsi explained. "I had not bowled since I was a child. The first time I tried it last year, I was scared to death for I only had my childhood memories to rely on. But I did OK, and my bowling is getting better," she said humbly. Through Glen, Kelsi met a new community of people who are passionate about the sport, including a professional instructor who has been working with her. "Now when I go bowling, sometimes there are so many people talking to me at once, trying to help me. I want to yell at them: "Stop talking to me at one time and get out of my head!"



Kelsi is looking forward to attending XX's expo again this year. In addition to hearing the keynote speakers XX and XX, she cannot wait to return to Lynnwood and try her hand in the technology lab to learn more about computers. "I really, really want to get a computer," Kelsi explained. "I really, really need a computer, and the expo is the perfect place to try out the different programs and equipment." Kelsi plans to learn, share, and connect even more this year. We are all excited to see what new doors open for her in the coming year after meeting more peers and specialists at the expo.

Connecting with XX: Senior Social Worker Marcia XX

The word *legacy* refers to something handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor. Many think of *legacy* as specifically referring to property that is handed down from generation to generation, but *legacy* also refers to the wisdom, experience, and knowledge that one passes on to a younger generation or student.

Senior Social worker Marcia XX embodies the definition of the word *legacy* – both as the recipient of knowledge and wisdom passed to her by older generations and as the source of wisdom, developments in the field, and institutional memory. She first joined XX as a social worker in February of 1977, and has been through four office locations, three CEOs, and four agency name changes. “I have seen a LOT of changes over the last 35 years, but one thing has always remained the same, that is, our focus on helping individuals with vision loss,” said Marcia.

Marcia has dedicated her life and career to working with and helping older adults, starting with her first internship experience after graduating from the UW School of Social Work in 1973. “I got wind of an opportunity to do an internship in Anchorage, Alaska. My internship was working with the UW School of Social Work, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Native Corporations, which was in the process of being formed in response to the newly-passed Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971,” explained Marcia. “I turned a six-month internship into a couple of years. It was a beautiful adventure full of so many wonderful things. I was able to travel the state and met incredibly wonderful people.”

The construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline provided much needed jobs for those living in the remote villages in the state, which meant that all of the able-bodied men and women were working on the pipeline every day and leaving the villages populated by the older adults and the young children. Marcia’s role was to travel to these remote villages and assess the situations in the communities, then help set-up cross-generational cooperative programs to support the elders as the village leaders and caretakers. “Through this, I talked with and learned from so many of the village elders. It cemented my love and desire to continue working with older generations,” said Marcia. “The legacy of these elders was being passed down directly to the children of the villages, making up for the absence of the adults who were working on the pipeline every day. And I learned so much from them as well.”

“Working in these remote places presented challenges that we don’t encounter in the cities,” Marcia shared. “I remember flying in to Bethel in one of those tiny little prop planes and landing on the frozen Yukon River as if it were an airstrip. I was only going to be there for the day, but an hour after landing the pilot found me in the village and told me ‘if we’re not out of here within a half hour, we’re stuck here for a week.’ So we scrambled like you wouldn’t believe,” she laughed.

When Marcia started as a social worker for XX (then called XX), she had years of experience working with aging populations, but not with those experiencing vision loss. “My early clients were really my early teachers because I didn’t have much experience with those who were visually impaired before. Part of their legacy was to teach me what it means to experience vision

loss. No one can understand what it means to be visually impaired unless you are. We need them to share their stories with us, to teach us,” she explained.

So many things have changed during Marcia’s tenure with XX, including our culture, attitudes, tools, and techniques for helping those with vision loss. “But the condition itself has not changed,” she said. Attitudes about aging and vision loss have changed remarkably. “Back in the early days, people would say to me ‘I’m the only person I know who has AMD or glaucoma.’ Now with the conditions increasing, everyone knows someone affected. People are more open about impairments and disabilities across the board. Today people are less isolated and much more integrated into mainstream life than they were in the 70s.” In addition, the tools and adaptive technology devices available now allow people a much greater degree of independence. “Back then there were no talking products... and the store was really a storage closet with a shoebox serving for the cash register. There was no such thing as assistive technology. When the rehabilitation specialist would go into the home, the question would be what work-around could be devised to help the client maintain themselves in their own homes? There weren’t even bump dots; we used fingernail polish instead,” said Marcia.

One of the aspects that Marcia appreciates the most about her work with XX is getting to know clients and work with them over the span of a lifetime. “Losing your sight is a loss and it comes with grief, and for most people because the loss is ongoing, it demands a continual process of adjustment and accommodation. They may talk with me, work with me, work with the low vision clinic for a period of time. Then down the road, their circumstances change again – loss of a spouse, they moved, they experienced additional vision loss, and they need us again to help them cope to the new adjustment,” she explained. “It is a treat to have relationships with people that extend over long periods of time.” Marcia and the rest of XX’s service team are privileged to be the recipients of part of our clients’ legacies. “The biggest value that social work brings is first and foremost the opportunity to ‘tell your story.’ Often when I ask someone to tell me about their vision loss, when did it happen, how did it happen... the story becomes a larger story of some significant event in their life. Out of telling the story, the person then begins to grapple with it themselves, find meaning with it, and put into place their dreams and hopes of what they are going to do, how are they going to live with vision loss, and what the future can hold.”

“The greatest gift for me has been being able to work with the clients I have worked with, sharing with them, helping them, encouraging them, supporting them while they adjust to the life-changing event of vision loss.”

While Marcia has been the lucky recipient of years of wisdom and experience passed down to her through her clients, she has her own legacy that is passed down and shared as well. “With all the clients I have helped, new staff I have mentored, the teams I have worked with... I hope that they have all taken away some knowledge, wisdom, encouragement, and hope as a result of my efforts. What has become woven into the lives of others gives meaning and purpose to mine.”