

Travel Salem turns locals into tour guides with Greeters program

[Laura Fosmire, Statesman Journal](#) March 31, 2015



On Tuesday morning, I went on a guided walking tour of downtown Salem. In true Oregon fashion, we did it in the pouring rain.

The tour was a demonstration by Travel Salem of their latest promotional effort, called the Greeters Program. It's a simple concept — visitors are paired with a Salem resident for a free, customizable and laid-back walking tour of the downtown area.

The program is modeled on an international program called the Global Greeters Network and is the first of its kind to come to Oregon.

“In 1992, it started in New York,” said Lourdes Gomez, destination development manager with Travel Salem. “It was a way of connecting volunteers with visitors so they would have a friend for a day, someone to show them around the city. We thought Salem could take advantage of the opportunity.”

Salem's Greeters Program is now launching with a crew of 15 volunteer guides in anticipation of a spring tourism rush. The idea is that the tours are customized to suit each visitor's interests in the Salem area: one volunteer can talk the best bike trails, another can point visitors in the direction of Salem's best restaurants, another can gush about architecture.

“We have a good, eclectic mix of interests,” Gomez said. “We want to forge a deeper connection with the local population and visitors. It's a great opportunity to showcase our town in a positive light.”

Travel Salem invited me on a greeters tour so I could get an idea for the program firsthand. So on Tuesday, I met with Gomez, Kara Kuh (Travel Salem's public relations manager) and our tour guide for the day, Ron Kelemen.

Kelemen has lived in Salem since 1974, save for a two-year period with the Peace Corps. When he isn't volunteering, he works as a certified financial planner with The H Group.

When it comes to downtown Salem, Kelemen knows his stuff.

We started our tour, huddled under umbrellas, along Court Street NE. Kelemen talked about Salem's underground tunnels, unearthed a few years ago by local historian John Ritter, and pointed out the colorful glass squares embedded in the sidewalk, which served as sources of light for the tunnels below.

We sought brief refuge from the rain inside the Reed Opera House, passed by the Court Street Dairy Lunch and walked along Front Street as we discussed Riverfront Park.

I live in downtown Salem. I work here. I'm intimately acquainted with the streets and the restaurants and, as a journalist, some of the history. But Kelemen knew tidbits I didn't.

For one thing, the Oregon Supreme Court was once housed in the Reed Opera House. The dairy lunch was Salem's first fast food restaurant. And, apparently, a world-famous madame once resided in the apartment above what is now Wild Pear.

We continued our tour up State Street. Kelemen talked about everything from the history of downtown Salem to its current gentrification to the small businesses he called local heroes. He cheerfully pointed out his favorite restaurants, even leading us inside a few. His appeal as an ambassador of the city was evident — people waved to him from their cars and business owners greeted him like an old friend.

"I like doing this because I like volunteering," he said. "It's hard always raising funds for tragic causes. This is just fun to do and I can plug in an hour of my time here and there."

We walked for more than an hour. By the time we finished back at Travel Salem, Kelemen confessed (to my surprise) it was his first time leading a greeter tour.

The program is always looking for more volunteers, Gomez said.

"We'd like to see some more younger folks, college age especially," she said. "We're still in the initial launch phase now."

Greeters undergo training sessions through Travel Salem and are asked to provide details about their personal interests so they can be matched with visitors with similar interests. The next training for anyone interested is scheduled for April 9 from 4 to 6 p.m. at the downtown visitor center on High Street NE.

In the coming months, Travel Salem officials hope that visitors will take advantage of the free, friendly tours.

After all, who better to showcase what makes Salem great than those who choose to call it home?