The river was flowing with a graceful yet powerful current, the summer sun sparkling off the surface of the water, spraying twinkling lights in every direction. In the distance there was a powerful sound of rushing water; one could only imagine what was awaiting around the next corner. This was Jeff Stephenson’s first time white water rafting, and there was no better place for a first time paddler than on the Deschutes River, a mighty and majestic river in Central Oregon.

Jeff’s favorite moment at Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp happened that day while rafting the Deschutes. The professional river guide asked Jeff if he would take over and guide the boat through the next set of rapids. Without hesitation, Jeff accepted the challenge and began to paddle hard towards the quickly approaching churning white water. “I shot the rapids!” Jeff courageously exclaimed. He paddled hard and guided his boat full of fellow campers and counselors through the rapids! The professional river guide declared the rapids be renamed “Jeff Waterfall”.

Jeff Stephenson was born and raised in Dearborn, Michigan, which has made him a devoted Detroit Tigers and Detroit Lions fan his entire life. While, for six years now Jeff has been a Portland, Oregon resident, he still returns home to visit Dearborn almost every summer. While visiting Dearborn, Jeff opts out of the typical lazy summer days and jumps right in to community advocacy and service work with full gusto. Declared an ambassador of the city by Mayor, Jack O’Reilly, Jeff exceeds the expectations of this prestigious title. Jeff regularly attends community activities, church functions, and visits the local fire department. He has even volunteered as the fire department’s mascot, Sparky, a human size Dalmatian, at
various community events. One such event was in coordination with the Dearborn Fire Department and
a program called the Burn Drive. The Burn Drive has been in operation for over 20 years with its sole
purpose to raise money and donations for children who have suffered from the ravages of burn injuries.
Jeff has had the privilege of volunteering as Sparky at Burn Drive events in which his role is to provide
happiness and entertainment, and deliver toys to children recovering from burn injuries. Jeff has also
volunteered as Sparky at fire station open houses where children and families are invited to learn about
and tour the fire station.

Summer vacations aside, back in Portland Jeff’s life is
just as busy as when in Dearborn. Jeff does volunteer work 1 -
2 days a week at Free Geek, a company in SE Portland that
recycles computers and helps those in need by donating
computers. Jeff enjoys attending church in Portland as well. He
typically attends with friends he has made through the Special
Olympics. Through the services of Community Pathways, a
Portland based adult support service, Jeff is able to maintain
his independence with shuttle rides around town and receive an
array of assistance as needed. Jeff also frequents the Tri-Met
bus system and is hoping to co-teach classes to assist in educating Tri-Met employees on how to
interact with and help keep individuals with disabilities safe while using public transportation.

Jeff was introduced to the Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp program a few years ago by camp
advocate, Berit Dart, through a casual conversation one day while working out at a 24 Hour Fitness
club. Jeff researched the camp and began attending that next summer. He enjoyed it so much that he
has spent two weeks there every summer since that fateful conversation at 24 Hour Fitness,
camping and adventuring on magnificent Mt. Hood.

It was the summer of 2013 when I had the great
pleasure of meeting and getting to know Jeff. We sat
near each other almost every meal for an entire week.
Great conversation was always shared in Fanning
Dining Hall, and laughter and smiles were aplenty when
Jeff was around! Jeff was especially famous in the
dining hall for noticing people who were not wearing
their name tags, better known as “wood cookies”. If an
individual were caught without a wood cookie, they would have to stand up in front of the entire dining hall and sing camp songs until the crowd was satisfied and cheered them down from “center stage”. In a friendly, cheerful manner, Jeff would notice and call out individuals without their wood cookies on, which always resulted in an eruption of cheering for the guilty individual to sing for the crowd. One quickly learned to never forget to wear their wood cookie around Jeff and his eagle eyes!

In his personal time throughout the year, Jeff spends countless hours raising money for the Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp. By the time the annual Walk, Roll, Stroll awareness and fundraising event took place in September 2013, Jeff was able to collect and raise over $1,100 by going door-to-door as an advocate for MHKC. This impressive amount made Jeff one of the top fundraisers of the year!

On a Sunday in January 2013, Jeff’s life was forever changed when he met the beautiful Kate Rickey, the woman of his dreams. That fateful January day was the first Special Olympics snowshoe practice of the season on Mt. Hood, as well as the first time that both Kate and Jeff had ever been snowshoeing. The two chatted during practice and the relationship immediately blossomed from that day forward. The couple successfully completed snowshoe season together, taking home gold medals with their team, the Washington County Wildcats, at the state competition on Mt. Bachelor in Central Oregon. The pair kept the momentum going and rolled into golf season with their Special Olympics team. The outcome was similar with gold medal victories at the regional and state competitions. Aside from just competitive athletics, Jeff and Kate enjoy many activities together, including going out to eat, attending church, going to movies, “just hangin’ out”, shopping, and for the first time in the summer of 2013, attending Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp together.

Kate, an eloquently spoken, polite and friendly woman, has lived in the Portland, Oregon area her entire life. She is an independent, self-determined woman who
has lived on her own for several years now. Kate primarily uses public transportation to travel around the Portland area, including taking the bus to get to work. Five days a week, Kate works at Self-Determination Resources, Inc. (SDRI), a full service brokerage company in Beaverton, Oregon. Kate completes a variety of janitorial tasks in her position at SDRI.

In her free time, Kate enjoys many hobbies and activities, including cooking and baking, reading, arts and crafts, watching movies, exploring museums and antique shops, strolling through Portland’s public gardens, and occasionally enjoying a day at the Portland Zoo. She has really enjoyed learning how to golf and snowshoe, both of which she has tried for the very first time this year with encouragement from Jeff. Kate also has a deep passion for politics and studying history, which she feels stems from the fact that her great grandfather was a US State Senator in Colorado many years ago. That history in the family is what drives Kate to research, understand, and advocate for important topics and issues that affect her community.

I had the pleasure of meeting Kate and Jeff together during her first time attending Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp. Jeff had introduced the idea of attending camp to Kate and she enthusiastically jumped all in at the opportunity to enjoy all that camp offers. Kate even signed up for the highly active and outdoorsy group called Tent-and-Travel; a group of campers and counselors who stay in tents outside of the main camp and participate in more extreme activities throughout the week. Kate spoke enthusiastically about her favorite camp activities which were “riding the bull” while white water rafting and the Mine Hike, where an interactive story unfolds while hiking through the woods. Kate enjoyed her first camp experience and her group so much that she said she would do anything to have her same group of campers and counselors back and will return to Tent-and-Travel again next year. Jeff, on the other hand, enjoys an equal combination of
the amenities of the main camp and the ruggedness of Tent-and-Travel. He will continue to divide his time, spending some weeks as a camper in the main camp and other weeks at Tent-and-Travel.

The lives and stories of Jeff and Kate are quite intriguing, motivating, and extremely inspiring. As we concluded our interview, Kate asked, “Please, if there’s one thing you include about Jeff, people need to know this: Jeff is always there for others. He always puts others and not himself first. He takes care of the little guys.” Jeff, slightly blushing, speaks softly, “Kate is a blessing.” “Oh, and he makes just the best chicken sandwiches!” Kate exclaims which causes smiles and laughter around the table. If there’s one thing in life that’s certain, it’s the fact that getting to know and spending time with Jeff and Kate will genuinely put a smile on your face, warm your heart, and put laughter in the air.