



Volunteer Profile: Project Champion Nate Carter

By Catherine Paglin

This is the first in a series of interviews with AWB-Oregon volunteers. Recently AWB-Oregon sat down with Nate Carter at the Northeast Portland offices of Eleven Engineering & Design, where he is a principal. Carter answered questions about his first-time experience as a Project Champion, leading AWB's work with the Northeast Emergency Food Program (NEFP) which provides groceries to more than 500 Portland families each month. Working with Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Carter and AWB team members Kim Olson of Soderstrom Architects and Nan Kambhu, a recent graduate of University of Oregon's master of architecture program, developed a plan to improve a gravel side yard at Luther Memorial Church. Elements of the plan include a covered, heated "market-style" plaza for distribution of fresh produce and bread, an area for unloading food donations, and an expanded vegetable garden.

Why did you get involved in AWB?

I was working for a small architecture and engineering firm. Their projects weren't the most satisfying in terms of design so I was looking for another avenue to not lose my skills, to foster them, grow them, and network within the profession. I found AWB and went to a couple of general meetings. It just seemed like a good fit—and I could participate without making my boss mad!

Before you led the Northeast Emergency Food Program (NEFP) project you worked on the Cathlamet Community Center, a project coordinated by John Blumthal [AWB founder]. How did that go?

I was on a subgroup that focused on the office and community room on the first floor. Most of the buildings I've worked on were buildings with a single use or maybe two uses that were tied together, so Cathlamet [a more complex project] was nice as far as expanding myself without putting the project at risk.

What attracted you to NEFP and made you decide to be the project champion?

The Cathlamet project was interesting in and of itself, but traveling's a little difficult for me because I have a young son. This project was local. It's in the Cully neighborhood and I live in Rose City Park, a neighboring area. Going to the neighborhood was no big deal. My main question before I started was, "How involved is this [project champion] role?" The Northeast Emergency Food Program was a good one for me because it was small enough and not complicated and it answered my questions in a real-world-experience kind of way. Also, the project was really similar in scope to projects I'd done here in the office. We've worked on storage and distribution facilities. This wasn't exactly the same, but pieces and portions of it fit.

How would you describe your role on the team?

Basically I facilitated meetings. One of us worked on the pavilion, one of us worked on the ramp, we all pitched in on renderings, Kim Olson did a preliminary cost analysis, and I kind of put my fingers into all of it, just here and there, to make sure the end project was a cohesive whole.

How did AWB support you in this role?

One thing that helped me out was John Blumthal was involved with this initially. I would send him material to read—programs and other materials—and he would edit.

Was there anything you did that was particularly helpful to making the project run smoothly?

I knew time was going to be an issue, especially with volunteers. So the first thing I did, before I even worried about designing anything, I laid out kind of a schedule or management philosophy—this is how we're going to do it. I put a lot of thought into that. I looked at questions like, How are we going to approach the project? How many volunteers do we have? How many aspects of the project do we have? What is the client's realistic timeline?

Was this project manageable along with your regular work? What did you do to maintain momentum?

Yes it was very manageable. We set up milestones, like let's have the plaza done in two weeks, with options and everything. We didn't say, it's got to look like this or you've got to bring this to the table. We said, just bring what you have, what you feel comfortable with doing. Setting up deadlines worked out pretty well. The meetings might have been longer than what the volunteers expected, but I believe it minimized their individual efforts at home and I think they appreciated that.

What advice would you give a new project champion about working with the client?

Your first meeting with the client should include talking about schedule and expectations. That sounds elementary but it's easy for that to get lost in the conversation sometimes because everyone says, "Let's talk about aesthetics and structures." So set aside time to talk the business side of it and figure out what the actual constraints are outside of the design parameters. Howard Kenyon [NEFP program manager] with Ecumenical Ministries, he's a very motivated person. He wanted to get this project done sooner rather than later, but he couldn't commit to a timeline because it's all based on getting grants

and funds. So we gave him a phasing plan and he's going off of that plan—what really needs to be done first and what can be done second, third and fourth and so on.

What qualities do you think a project champion needs?

You have to have the ability to take the reins and hold on. You also need to be flexible and listen to everyone else. It has to be a collaborative atmosphere or you lose volunteers real quick. And with the client you need to be able to articulate about your process and the meaning behind what you're providing them. If they ask for construction costs and it's two or three times what they thought it was going to be, you have to be able to explain that to them.

Would you do it again?

Yes, I would do it again. Ecumenical Ministries were good people to work with and Kim and Nan worked at least as hard as I did, if not more. That always makes it pleasant.