

Random acts of KINDNESS

Locals hand out anonymous awards during their morning walks

10/20/04

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Forming a walking group in her neighborhood has been good for Betty Hatch's heart.

And not just because she gets 90 minutes of cardiovascular exercise three times a week.

The 66-year-old and her friends have, for the past couple of years, been handing out awards anonymously for things that make them feel good during their early-morning walks. It could be anything from a whimsical yard decoration to a manicured lawn.

"We wanted to knock on the doors and thank these people for this beauty," said Mrs. Hatch. "Since we didn't feel that was appropriate, I decided to make a WOW Award."

Mrs. Hatch, who owned the La Belle modeling agency in Santa Barbara for 28 years, takes time out of her busy schedule to handcraft each WOW, or Walkers on Watch, Award. Shaped like stars, they are made of laminated yellow card stock with magnets on the back and are usually placed on recipients' mailboxes. Only one is typically given out on each walk.

The group of up to 18 meets promptly at 7:30 a.m. in the driveway of the Hope Ranch home Mrs. Hatch shares with her husband, Stan. They immediately take off on a route, which varies depending on the day. On a recent morning, just minutes into the walk, Jo Magistad and her walking partner, Lily, were already out of breath.

"We had to catch up!" explained Mrs. Magistad, who jogged up a steep hill. "We are conscientious pooper picker-uppers."

Lily, you see, is her dog.

Mrs. Magistad joined the group about a year and a half ago.

"It got me out of a morning fitness class I just hated," she said.

The 74-year-old usually brings Lily with her on the nearly 4-mile walks. The people she adopted her from initially expressed concern over whether the dog would get out enough given Mrs. Magistad's age.

As if.

Lily wasn't the only dog on the walk. Mr. Hatch -- who was the only man in the group -- brought along Bubble, his and his wife's Pomeranian.

Making their way up the winding hills of Hope Ranch, the group pointed out various residences that have received awards. One had a shrine, complete with a Buddha-like statue, built in the garden. Another had a metal mailbox protected by a gargoyle.

Gargoyles, Ditte Wolff explained, are often found in Europe on tops of buildings and serve as downspouts for rainwater. That's where, she said, we got the word "gargle."

"She knows everything," Judy Dawson, 68, pointed out under her breath.

Ms. Wolff, 66, a retired San Marcos High School art teacher, is one of the original members of the walking group, which began when Mrs. Hatch injured her rotator cuff while weight-training and needed to find another way to work out. She asked Ms. Wolff, her neighbor, to join her, and the group has grown from there.



About a year into it, Mrs. Hatch came up with the idea to give out awards. So far, they've handed out more than 70.

There would have been more, she said, except everyone in the group has to agree that whatever's in question deserves one.

"My husband can't stand it if there's one of those garbage Dumpsters that is visible," said Mrs. Hatch. "We'll find this wonderful place and Stan will say, 'I can see this Dumpster. It looks awful!' So we don't give the award."

About 45 minutes into this particular walk, the group came to a halt at a residence near Via Bendita and Via Esperanza. Everyone was abuzz about the trumpet-vine-topped rock wall that surrounded the property. And there wasn't even a Dumpster in sight.

"I don't like it," announced Mr. Hatch. But he was just joking -- this time.

"I don't like the gate, though," said Ms. Wolff.

"This is for the wall!" stressed Mrs. Hatch.

"Only the wall," said Ms. Wolff, making it clear that was the condition for her agreement.

Mrs. Hatch, using a permanent marker, then filled in the blank on the yellow star to let the recipient know what it was for. It now read: "The WOW Award, from Walkers on Watch, for your natural rock wall and its trumpet vine. You are Worthy of Winning. 10/04/04."



She then stuck it on the mailbox.

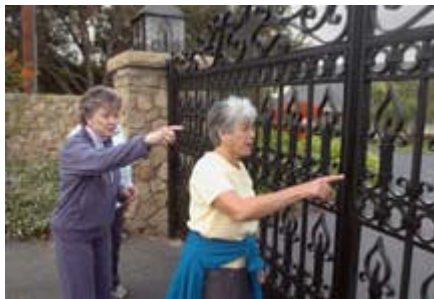
"I would have chosen the trumpet vine in a different color," shrugged Ms. Wolff, who didn't care for the reddish-orange. "I would have chosen yellow or lavender. A contrast would be nice."

A few blocks later, the group was "ooohing and ahhhing" over a bed of white dusty miller -- a potential candidate for future awards.

"It's such a beautiful shade," said Elaine Toledo.

"We're about to come to that house where the lady busted us," announced Mrs. Dawson, a little later. Sure enough, there it was -- the spectacular landscape they once rewarded for its manicured lawns and sculpture.

"A couple months later, we were walking by the same house," Mrs. Hatch recalled. "(The woman who lives there) was pulling out of the driveway and screeched to a stop and said, 'I found you! You are Walkers on Watch!' She said, 'We love our star! It's on the refrigerator.' "



"To have a woman with such affluence be excited about this," added Mrs. Hatch, holding up the paper star, "that's what was thrilling."

It wasn't the only time the group was caught red-handed, or as Mrs. Hatch likes to say, "yellow-handed."

Kenny Young recalls how his family figured out who gave them their WOW Award for a Halloween decoration at the edge of their property: a witch that looks like her broom slammed into a tree.

"We have video cameras on this property. I have one that's down on the street that notices everything that goes on in the driveway and on the road," said Mr. Young. "I was eating breakfast one day and looked up at the video monitor and saw about 15 people in the driveway."

It was the WOW group.

"I said, 'I wonder what the Hatches are up to?'"

He soon found out.

"We're up on a hill, so we can't see it from the house," said Mr. Young, whose family still has the award. "I was happy somebody noticed it and appreciated it."

SETTING THE PACE

The Walkers on Watch have anonymously given out awards for two years. So why are Betty Hatch and her walking group willing to give up their identities now? They hope to inspire others to form similar groups in their neighborhoods. Mrs. Hatch offers these tips to get you



started:

- Leave on time.
- Let one person decide which direction and streets to walk.
- Choose an alternate route if the terrain becomes unsafe for any of the walkers.
- To get to know group members, walk in twos, changing partners often during the walk.
- Bring money in case the group decides to stop for coffee.
- Decide as a group who will receive a WOW Award during the walk.

For more information, go to www.selfesteem.org on the Web. Click on "curriculum," then "presentation," then "Do you want to walk?"

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

A feel-good activity: The Walkers on Watch walking group combines exercise for the body and soul. They give out anonymous awards for things that make them say, "Wow!" during their morning workouts.

The WOW group doesn't discriminate when accepting members. Any race, religion, creed and breed can join -- so long as they're well-behaved. Just ask Lily.

And the winner is ... Well, no one's really sure of the recipient's name. But that's OK -- most recipients don't know who gave the award, either.

A rock wall topped with a reddish-orange trumpet vine in Hope Ranch recently won a WOW, or Walkers on Watch, Award.

Are Judy Dawson, left, and Ditte Wolff pointing at a candidate for a future WOW Award?

Ditte Wolff, left, initially wasn't too sure about neighbor Betty Hatch's, right, idea to give out awards during their morning walks. But then she saw people's reactions to it and everything changed.

She's got sole. Betty Hatch stepped up her walking group's routine by giving out the awards.