

Jack Knox: Wood-chopping charity struck a cord

[Jack Knox](#) / Times Colonist

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Mercy Ships, a Christian charity with its Canadian headquarters in Victoria, has received about \$15,000 from Gulf Islands wood choppers, almost all of them retirees. Photograph By Mercy Ships



Pender Island's wood choppers have split, as it were. As of this week, their charitable foundation is no more. With most of the axemen in their 70s, the business of chopping and hauling cordwood had become a bit much. Time to give it a rest.

But man did they sweat and grunt their way to a lot of good over the past few years, going back to 2010 when Jane McIntosh volunteered to work on a hospital ship in Africa.

Let's start there.

McIntosh was 56 when, new to Pender and having recently lost husband John to cancer, she signed on for a two-year stint with Mercy Ships, a Christian charity with its Canadian headquarters in Victoria. To raise the money for her expenses, she decided to sell some of the fallen trees on her property.

Enter David Howe. Raised on the Saanich Peninsula, he had moved to Pender after a career as an investment banker that took him to the U.S., Mexico and Europe. That experience had left him pondering the big questions, like world peace. Fine, said his wife, Ina Timmer, but if you want to make a difference, try starting here. (Dave says Ina is the practical one.) So Howe, a strapping six-foot-two, began chopping wood for his neighbours, for free. Rich or poor, it didn't matter. He liked the work and it meshed with his belief in the concept of service to others.

He did this for four years until McIntosh asked him to split her wood. Not only did he do that, but he told other Pender residents that if they really wanted to pay for his wood-chopping, they could send the money to McIntosh's Mercy Ships work.

Word spread. George and Penny Finkbeiner said they would donate a fallen 200-year-old fir on their property.

Another man volunteered to deliver the wood. It grew from there: By the time McIntosh left for Africa, about 20 cords had been chopped.

Then it kept growing: By the time McIntosh got back two years later, the Greenangels Choppers Foundation had been born. About 35 islanders, including a core of up to a dozen choppers, were involved in the ongoing effort, bucking up, splitting and selling. A couple of backhoe operators volunteered to pull timber from the bush. Other volunteers ferried over with full pickup trucks from Mayne Island, then pitched in with the chopping on Pender. Timmer stacked wood and kept the books straight.

Other islanders both donated and bought the wood. Former Alberta cabinet minister Jim Dinning gave up 10 cords worth from his land. Another new arrival from Alberta surrendered the fallen fir and arbutus from his 25-acre property, then bought back the split arbutus for \$4,000 — twice the going rate.

By the time they packed it in this week, the choppers, almost all of them retirees, had raised about \$100,000, one cord at a time. About \$15,000 went to Mercy Ships, but most of the projects were local. They raised \$13,000 for a generator at the community hall, an emergency power supply for the island. There was money for a gardening project at the school. When a six-month-old baby needed a kidney transplant, they helped the family get to Edmonton. Ditto for when someone needed an eye operation. On and on it went: The food bank, a beach cleanup, trail-building, lacrosse, Habitat for Humanity, parks, kids' summer programs, the Pender bus... They forged new relationships and tightened old ones. Howe, the southern Gulf Islands director on the Capital Regional District board, would stop on the Saanich Peninsula on his way to meetings in Victoria to deliver to the Tsawout First Nation a truckload of cedar from Pender (their traditional territory) for ceremonial burning.

When McIntosh heard the choppers were hanging it up this week, she wrote a letter of gratitude detailing what their contribution had meant in Africa. Not only did they fund her, but they paid to support and train two men from Sierra Leone who continue to work on the hospital ship. They funded a woman who developed equipment that sterilizes medical instruments in places with poor water and electrical supplies. Another guy they helped works with an eye surgery charity. After George Finkbeiner (nicknamed Navajo Joe for his ability to scout out trees to cut) died in 2013, a memorial Kiva micro-lending account was set up that has, so far, made 276 loans to entrepreneurs in 36 countries. That then spun into support for the Victoria-based African Community Project's initiative to promote sustainable forests through the planting of millions of seeds.

"You did this," McIntosh wrote the Pender Island choppers.

Yes, they did. Behold the power of a grey-hair with an axe.

Howe, who turns 72 on New Year's Day, says they still might chop a bit when they find someone in need. What they won't do, though, is set up another revenue-generating non-profit group.

"It got a bit beyond a bunch of guys out there helping neighbours."