

The People Who Make Ashland Special

Getting to Know **Dana Preston** of the Ashland Chamber of Commerce

By **Jordan Pease** - Dec. 2020 Issue of **Locals Guide Magazine**- Ashland, Oregon



The socioeconomic climate of any community is largely shaped by the vitality of its businesses. That may be especially true for a tourist economy like Ashland's. **Dana Preston** has been a dedicated and passionate community leader here for decades, beginning as an "inexperienced" intern for the Ashland Chamber at age 18. Here is a woman who is following her life's calling, and during our interview, this Ashlander reveals what an authentic and genuinely caring community servant she is, with several interesting clues about the ways she's so well-qualified to serve us.

"I was born at Ashland Community Hospital, and I transferred to the Medford school system in the second grade after my parents divorced. My family's name, Fortmiller, has been painted on the bleachers of the Ashland High School football field for however many years now, and I would always go to the Ashland football games even though I lived in Medford. I went to my very first Grizzlies game when I was about five months old. So many fun memories there."

"My first job was here in Ashland right when I turned 16, working for **Lin Mattson** at a children's clothing store in the downtown plaza called Small Change. Lin was a wonderful, wonderful woman; I miss her dearly. I did that for two years, and I absolutely loved it. My dad, **Dean Fortmiller**, managed Fortmiller's Department Store, where Earthly Goods is now, right next to the Chamber's offices. The Fortmiller family moved down here from Albany in the 30's, and my great-grandfather and his business partner bought that building and opened Fortmiller's in 1935. It closed in the mid-90's."

"So I think that's why I was so excited at age 16 to get a job in retail because I loved the independent businesses here in Ashland so much. There's just something cool and unique to that flavor of businesses. It just doesn't exist at the box stores."

And I know we're all looking at our holidays differently now. Our Ashland stores are doing a lot of creative things to engage with us and keeping it safe. They're doing so awesome."

I asked Dana if she could think of a particularly life-changing experience to share, and she didn't have to reflect very long before launching into her story about meeting **Sandra Slattery** at age 18. With a lot of excited emotion, she explained that the two of them immediately felt a strong connection, and that Sandra had invited her to intern at Ashland Chamber, which began a decades-long friendship and mentoring relationship.

“Not to sound cheesy, but if there were such a thing as love-at-first-sight between employee and an employer, that’s how it began with us. She still tells me all the time; ‘I knew you didn’t have the experience, but you had the passion and the enthusiasm, and the love and the personality for [the internship]. And if you have all that, I can teach everything else.’ So [Sandra] took a risk on me being the youngest intern she had brought on, with no experience, at age 18. And every summer and every winter break I would come back [from college] and just do projects for the Chamber. And even in grad school I would help them with projects as well. A lot of things; like historical archiving of files, and research for the website. Through this, I really fell in love with all of the work the Chamber and Sandra did in this community!”

“And then fortuitously, I came back to Ashland in 2008 after grad school, thinking I’d just come back to Southern Oregon for the summer, but things worked out and I was hired again by Sandra to be Projects and Special Events Coordinator full time at the Chamber. I’ve had a few different roles since, and I’m the Membership and Business Development Director now,” Dana said while scrolling around on her cell phone screen to be sure. “Yes, that’s it, that’s my title now!”

“I loved my master’s program; I really value it. It gave me the ability to think more critically; to think more broadly, and the practical experience with thinking something through from start to finish. I’m a big supporter of higher education. That was at Portland State, where I graduated with a Master’s in Public Administration, with an emphasis in civic engagement and community development.”

“I went to Oregon State for my undergraduate, the Beavers! With a double major in history and public relations. I pledged Tri Delta Sorority, where I was an officer, which was so awesome because I learned good leadership skills there! My goal in school was to go to Washington, DC. I wanted to work for a think tank and do research. But I only wanted to work for one that was really neutral. Not super-conservative or liberal. But that didn’t work out, and in hindsight, *in hindsight*, I’m grateful.”



Next I asked Dana if she had any advice for young people: “Well, I think it’s to take every opportunity that’s presented to you,” Dana answered with confident emphasis. “Don’t limit yourself by thinking that you’re going to go in one direction. Take as many opportunities as you can, as they’re presented to you. Don’t discredit the value of a job. No matter what the job is, you’ll learn something. You’ll be shocked to learn it could open your eyes to something really new.”

“And school. From a school perspective, you’re always going to wish you knew what you know at every level you take. I mean; when I was in college, I wish I knew how to study for high school the way I studied in college. And when I got to grad school, I wish I knew how to study in college the way I studied in grad school. So you’re always going to feel that evolutionary process. But at the same time, commit to it, and you’ll get out of it what you put into it. That’s what I think. Challenge yourself, and if you’re very anxious or enthusiastic for an opportunity that doesn’t go your way, don’t let that not open a door for you in another place. Don’t let a letdown let you down! Ha!”

“Oh wow, Dana- that’s some potent advice, I love it!” I said. Then I went for some curiosity questions, “Let’s do the ‘stranded on a desert island’ question next, okay? Please say what your absolute favorites are; Book, food, music and movie.”

“Okay, a book. Book is easy: *Pride and Prejudice*. I read it at least every year. And I have read the 900-page annotated version too, and read every footnote. Oh shoot, it’s actually not that easy! Because *East of Eden* would be my second favorite. Food. Hmm. Since it’s an island, a tropical island? I’ll pick sushi. And then music. Like an album? Not a Spotify playlist? Well then, we’re going to go with Mumford and Sons, I think it’s called *The Road to Red Rocks*. Movie? That’s an easy one too; *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. But if you asked me in spring, I’d maybe pick another one.”



Dana really had to ponder my next question, and after a lot of consideration she said, “Something that people would never guess about me? Well, I was probably the worst youth competitive skier up at Mt. Ashland! And, well, I’ll just take credit for it; I’m a great skier, but I hate competition. My dad would always make fun of me, in a kind spirited way. He’d get me all pumped-up for race day, carbo-load the night before, wax-up my skis and everything. Then we’d get to the starting

gate, and the cowbells would be ringing, and he would be shouting. And then I would come out of the gate, and swoosh! Right into a snowplow, plunk! And it’s something we still joke about to this day, I’m just not super-competitive. And I love that we have such a great ski area, it’s just 30 minutes to get up there.”

“So you’ll have to forgive me a little on this next one Dana- but I have to get a paranormal question in here you know, so do you believe that Sasquatch roams the forests of the Northwest?”

“I love paranormal things too and I am a spiritual person,” Dana replied. “And I have a faith that drives me to believe in things unseen. So, do you actually have to SEE a Sasquatch to believe they exist? I don’t necessarily think that. For example, my favorite Bible verse is Hebrews 11:1, the part about how faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see. So, it’s all about faith! And your reliance on faith. So, I have faith; I believe in things I’ve never seen, but that I feel spiritually connected to. So in that light; I can’t say Sasquatch doesn’t exist. But I’ve never seen one, and so I guess I don’t have a spiritual connection to them, ha-ha!”

“Let’s talk some more about your role at Ashland Chamber, Dana. Obviously, businesses are facing really tough challenges right now. What is it more specifically about small business that you love so much?”

Dana replied, “Well, the entrepreneurship, the creativity, the nimbleness? The fluidity, the drive, is what I mean. You think about a small business owner that created something that’s their own. My grandfather used to say, ‘you’ve never owned a small business until you’ve been the janitor.’ On one day, you can be managing the finances and the P&L’s, and the next day cleaning the toilets because it all has to happen. It’s all a part of it. For me, what I love, is getting to work with people that have a lot of cool ideas and are so excited about Ashland thriving. This is just SUCH a cool town, and I think it’s the businesses that make it that way.”

“And with Covid now, it’s so hard. Our holidays are coming, and everyone wants to spend time with family. But we know we can’t, and it’s just really hard. My 93-year-old grandmother can’t even come to Thanksgiving dinner now. It impacts all of our worlds significantly, and the more we can do to take it seriously, the more we can protect our businesses.

The Chamber received a grant from the State for an e-commerce website to make it easier for people to shop local from home. It’s ShopAshlandOregon.com. It’s a simple way to support our businesses right now. Another way people are supporting the local shops is buying gift certificates or take-out from the restaurants.”

“I think the thing for us to do, the community members, is to just follow the guidelines and know that the businesses are doing everything they can to keep us safe. Please Ashland; let’s do everything we can to support our businesses.”

Jordan Pease is a 19-year resident of Ashland and Founder/Director of **Rogue Valley Metaphysical Library and Media Exchange** www.rvml.org