

Locals Spotlight:

## Passion, Compassion and Service- Getting to Know Ashlander Abby Lewis

By Jordan Pease

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**Abby Lewis** is a 20-year resident of Ashland and has been a strong supporter of RVML since the very beginning. She is very much a *walks her talk* kind of person with a strong, demonstrated commitment to helping people. She's a very involved community member and has had a hand in many different things in the Rogue Valley helping individuals and organizations. Here, Abby shares about herself including her newest community service endeavor, founding her very own nonprofit.

**Thank you for opening up about yourself here Abby, can we begin with your 'how I got to Ashland' story?** Ashland has impacted so many people the same way. We come to visit and then we never leave! We get 'the call' to be here. My parents had come to visit me in **San Francisco** in 2001 and we drove up to Ashland to visit you Jordan, and to see your newly established library. Everything about Ashland was magical, and within two months, I had left my entire life behind in California to be here.

**Please fill-in-the-blank; "I'm having the time of my life when I'm [blank]"** I'm having the time of my life for me is less about *what* I'm doing and more about *how* I'm doing it. There's a certain state of grace that comes from being present in the moment. When I'm completely absorbed in what I am doing, whether it's mundane or fantastical; I feel in a universal flow and that's what makes me happy. Every moment is literally the 'time' of my life. I find when I am present, I pay attention to the details and do more conscientious and thorough work. I don't rush, I don't resent the task at hand, I consider the impact of what I'm doing which creates an energetic hum. Sometimes in the world of social media we can get too focused on curating our lives for the sake of others' impression of us and we chase after adventures. I don't strive to show everyone how 'incredible' my life is, but rather to give thanks every day for all the blessings.

**Talk about the work you do with the nonprofit you founded?** I founded **Golden Rule ReEntry** in 2020. We are a trauma-informed, community-based organization that assists formerly incarcerated people through community engagement. I like to say we are where the community meets the agencies. There are a ton of amazing resources in Southern Oregon, but sometimes it's hard to find out about them and what they offer. We don't just tell people where to get help, we literally drive them there. We talk, we listen, and we laugh, a lot! We aren't just 'serving' people, we are 'connecting' with them. Community members can engage by working directly with our participants one on one, by offering classes or services, or by being part of the **Golden Rule Network (GRN)** which will let people

know when we have a need; like a piece of furniture for someone moving into an apartment for example, or a meeting room, etc. The GRN allows people to drop in with support as they are moved to do so. We have six programmatic areas of support: Resource Navigation, Healing from Trauma, Life Skills, Kinship, Self-Assessment, Career & Entrepreneurial support. We are new and still in development.



**What's your take on metaphysics and spirituality?**

Since there can be a charge and preconceived notions about these words, I would begin by saying they both simply point to a deeper, more comprehensive notion of reality. I have always been interested in the nature of reality. I even built a 3-D model of 'truth' in my spare time when I was younger. Whether you lean towards understanding the organizing principles behind and beyond the physical world (metaphysics) or the nature of love as an energetic force (spirituality), most people find a way to engage with this subject area in a way that

makes sense to them. It seems to me that most of the problems in the world are caused by a world view that doesn't stretch further than the personal, social, scientific, or economic realms. If one can stretch into more esoteric realms, ones that underpin the physical world we live in, more righteous, ethical, life serving actions result. We need that on the planet right now! And of course, RVML is a great resource for anyone who wants to explore those realms more.

**Thanks Abby, yes. Please tell about a hero or mentor who's influenced you?** Without a doubt it's **Father Gregory Boyle** who founded **Homeboy Industries** in Los Angeles. It's the largest gang intervention program in the world. Father Greg, AKA 'G-Dog', leads with a culture of 'radical tenderness'. Once I realized it was okay to use that language and lead an effective organization from the heart, I got the green light from the universe to create **Golden Rule ReEntry**.

**Please tell a story about a life-changing incident, or can you recall a life-changing epiphany?** Reading the book, **CPTSD: From Surviving to Thriving** by **Pete Walker**. It explains how children growing up in a dangerous or toxic environment suffer from Complex PTSD. Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn become the patterns of survival. Reading this book brought everything into focus for me. I started to understand the state of the world, from both the people I knew personally to the world at large.

Discovering Homeboy Industries and reading Walker's book were like the sun and rain on a seed deep inside me that had always wanted to work with the incarcerated. It created an internal calibration that allowed the universe to blast through me and push **Golden Rule ReEntry** into being.

**What's a thing people would never guess about you?** I was born in England and only recently became an American Citizen. Also, my taste in music. I love **Slipknot**.

**What is your most favorite book?** There are so many books and so many directions to go in, but the one that has impacted me the most recently is **Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility."** As a white person

immersed in a world that sets 'whiteness' as the 'norm', I had been blind to the inherent, racist narrative that goes unquestioned by white people. Even good, white people who don't consider themselves racist are mostly unaware of the systemic, linguistic, historical, and social programming that they have absorbed and assimilated. There is a lot of "undoing" that needs to happen in the way we think, talk about, and respond to people who have had an utterly different experience of life.

**What are three of your Favorite things in the world?** First would be my partner, Michael Mollo. We've been together 18 years and he has been profoundly influential in my personal and spiritual growth. We are very kind to each other and always strive to be supportive and patient.

My second most favorite thing are my parents. I am blessed and I know it because my parents created such a wonderful container of love, safety and stimulation for my brother and me. I work with people who have experienced a lot of disfunction and trauma growing up and I don't take for granted all the blessings I've been given this lifetime. They moved to Ashland in 2017 and I am very happy that they live here now too!

The third most favorite thing is watching people blossom. Through my nonprofit, I have the privilege of working with people who have been incarcerated and are reentering society. Most of them have had to overcome incredible challenges including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), addiction, shame, mental illness, and dysfunctional relationships, to name a few. I have witnessed countless people make the decision to take responsibility for their lives. It's not an easy transition and the results are not instant but seeing that transformation in the face of such daunting obstacles is humbling and affirming. As **Father Gregory Boyle** says "...A compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." I feel that way about people who have had to deal with any of the challenges I mentioned earlier. They are so precious to me.

**What advice do you have for young people in our community?** Firstly, I think young people today are amazing and we might be better off taking advice from them! I do think that the **Desiderata** is a wonderful paragraph of wisdom (it's easy to find on Google.) Other things that come to mind are: Don't feed into drama. People often operate out of their wounds, so try to let other people's shortcomings and even hostilities illicit a sense of compassion and curiosity in you. Understand that you create ripples into the world with your actions and that what you do really does matter. Small acts of kindness can have enormous impacts. You have a choice on how to respond in every situation. Be present with people and really listen when others speak. Be an independent thinker; never accept that unacceptable things are 'just the way it is'.

**Thank you for all the ways you're serving our community, Abby. In closing, what are five words to describe the rest of your life?** Dedicated, kind, ethical, conscientious, and effective.

Learn more about Abby's nonprofit: [GoldenRuleReEntry.org](http://GoldenRuleReEntry.org)

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