

Cheri Marusa describes herself simply as a Cle Elum housewife and mother whose roots in Upper Kittitas County go back four generations. But in reality she has quietly, and those who find themselves on the other side of one her causes would say “not always quietly,” come to be the face of citizen activism in Washington State.

It’s been 15 years since she emerged from that housewife-and-mother role with a campaign to bring enhanced emergency medical services to the Cle Elum area, founding Life Support, which she has served as president since then and helped guide its dramatic impact on not only emergency medical services but enhanced healthcare as well.

Marusa has, in essence, become the cause of causes, launching programs to address challenges ranging from small-town economic development problems to pressing children’s issues.

Her first cause, Life Support, required funds from the legislature and the effort to get the funds launched her on a path that allowed her to become over the years one of the most familiar faces in the legislative halls and offices. Some lawmakers who were at first resistant to her funding requests, particularly in financially challenging times in the legislature, might describe her as an unrelenting force.

Her success at attracting legislative support would make the most successful lobbyists envious, although she insists she’s not a lobbyist. In fact, because she doesn’t draw a salary from any of the organizations she advocates for, she has occasionally wound up sleeping in her car when she has had to overnight in Olympia during legislative sessions.

She had to overcome substantial community opposition when she undertook to create Life Support since physicians at the local Cle Elum clinic feared they’d be put out of business if Marusa’s efforts to increase the quality of medical care in Upper County proved successful.

The Life Support initiative culminated with attracting Swedish Medical Center to open a facility in Cle Elum. And her fund-raising efforts resulted in construction of new fire stations and purchase of life-saving tools for the emergency medical responders.

I first met Marusa in 2003 when I was among the Seattle-area business people she convinced to go on the board of her 501c3 Life Support organization.

She has sought my advise on several occasions for her initiatives since then, and paid little heed to my counsel of “Cheri, that simply isn’t going to happen” and went on to make them happen.

The first of those unlikely successes for which I said “not gonna happen” related to Life Support when her campaign on behalf of emergency medical services wound up with a \$2.7 million appropriation at a time of severe financial challenge for the lawmakers.

I had the same advise when she went after lawmakers for a \$2 million plus grant for a Junior Achievement Center in Yakima to provide financial literacy programs for young people in a new JA World learning center, a facility that the business community in Yakima supported with additional dollars. The local supporters of the facility, when it was completed, boasted that Yakima was the only small community in which JA has built such a facility anywhere in the country.

Marusa has an earthy air about her, a small-town mother of two daughters who can look in the mirror and chuckle as she describes the woman she sees there as “a well-rounded personality.”

Her persuasiveness with legislators to support her causes prompted House Speaker Frank Chopp to enlist her support, again as a volunteer, for his One Washington initiative, sending her on the road to visit communities and small towns in the central and eastern parts of the state to learn of issues challenging them. She confided to me that she really hadn't spent much time in other parts of the state until she got involved with One Washington.

And Marusa already has a busy first quarter of 2015 planned. In addition to pressing the Legislature for funding of a couple of projects, since she wants an appropriation to restore an historic building in Roslyn, the small Kittitas County town made famous as the home of the TV series Northern Exposure. She is also tackling an issue opposed by some potent adversaries, sheriffs and police chiefs from around the state.

She created the Roslyn Renaissance project to guide preservation and renovation of historic commercial buildings and community character, as well as attract business and generate permanent jobs in the old coal-mining community where her husband Rob's father was a miner after bringing his family there from Croatia.

She is also chair of the Roslyn Downtown Association and, along the way, launched the Cle Elum Rotary club.

Her current legislative battle with chiefs and sheriffs is over her campaign to require training for reserve police officers similar to that required for regular law enforcement officers.

"It's okay if reserves do traffic control and the like," she explained. "But if they are going to carry a gun and have arresting authority, they should be no less training than regular officers. Chiefs and sheriffs don't want to incur that cost so they are fighting this."

Plus she is heading to Nicaragua in February with a number of Seattle Seahawks and other NFL players accompanying her to work in impoverished villages in that country as part of an effort to assist Seattle-based GIVE.

The leader of the NFL crew accompanying her is Seahawks wide receiver Jermaine Kearse, for whom she recently created and chairs the Jermaine Kearse Foundation, focused, as she describes it, on "engaging and inspiring youth by creating real-life relevance through experiential learning and tying learning to living a healthy lifestyle"

So how did she convince a group of NFL stars to accompany her on a trip to assist the poor in Nicaragua?

"I merely told them, 'come with me. I want you to do something that will be life changing and you will come back a better person.'" she said.

It's the same message she has carried for most of her involvements over much of her 55 years.

