



# *taking care of* BUSINESS

## Babe Lehrer Gets Stuff Done in Tacoma

Babe Lehrer is a giver, both to the people who know her and to the city she lives in. Full of spunk, her youthful energy defies the fact that many of her peers retired to their rocking chairs years ago. Tacoma's heart beats stronger because of Babe's many contributions and fundraising leadership. Statues stand erect, memorializing heroes and well-known figures, plaques boast her years of service to the city, and still, she presses on.

"I don't plan on slowing down, not as long as I can be productive," Babe says. And that she is. So far, Babe is credited with raising about \$15 million for the city of Tacoma through the years. With a schedule that rivals that of a 30-something executive, Babe schedules appointments back-to-back, never skipping a beat. "I'm just a crazy lady that enjoys what I do," she says.

Babe has many reasons to love Tacoma, but Tacoma has more reasons to love her. Born and raised in the City of Destiny, Babe has fond memories of her childhood. "I remember when gas was 18 cents a gallon and milk was 10 cents a quart and it had a layer of cream on top." How old is she? "Age is a number, and mine's unlisted." >>

BY CHRISTY PESSEMIER  
PHOTOS BY JEFF HOBSON



<< Babe was named Griselda Lyon at birth. But, being the baby of the family, everyone called her "Babe." And it wasn't long before Babe made a name for herself selling hosiery as a young adult at Leeds shoe store.

The money Babe made went toward her college tuition at the College of Puget Sound, now the University of Puget Sound. "Those were the lean years," she says. "In those days, you entertained yourself. You found things to do that didn't cost money." In her 20s, Babe started her own chain of apparel stores, Lyon's Apparel. Babe and her husband Herman, who died in 2006, had 15 stores throughout Washington and Oregon. Babe was busy, and she enjoyed every minute of it. "With retail, you either love it or hate it. I loved it."

After selling the apparel business in 1985, Babe wasn't ready to retire.

"I don't vacation very well," she says. "I don't want to lie out in the sun. My retirement is in doing good things for the community." So, Babe took her sales skills in a different

direction — fundraising. Her community involvement and leadership positions (among many) as chairwoman for Tacoma Historical

Society's Top of the Ocean Campaign, leadership gift chairwoman for the Pantages Theater renovation and Tacoma Community College's and Broadway Center for the Performing Arts' board of directors prove her dedication and desire to bless her hometown.

"I get hooked on these projects I'm working on," Babe says.

The Babe Lehrer Japanese Garden, named in her honor, was unveiled at Tacoma Community College in 2007. Babe also is credited for raising the necessary funds for that project.

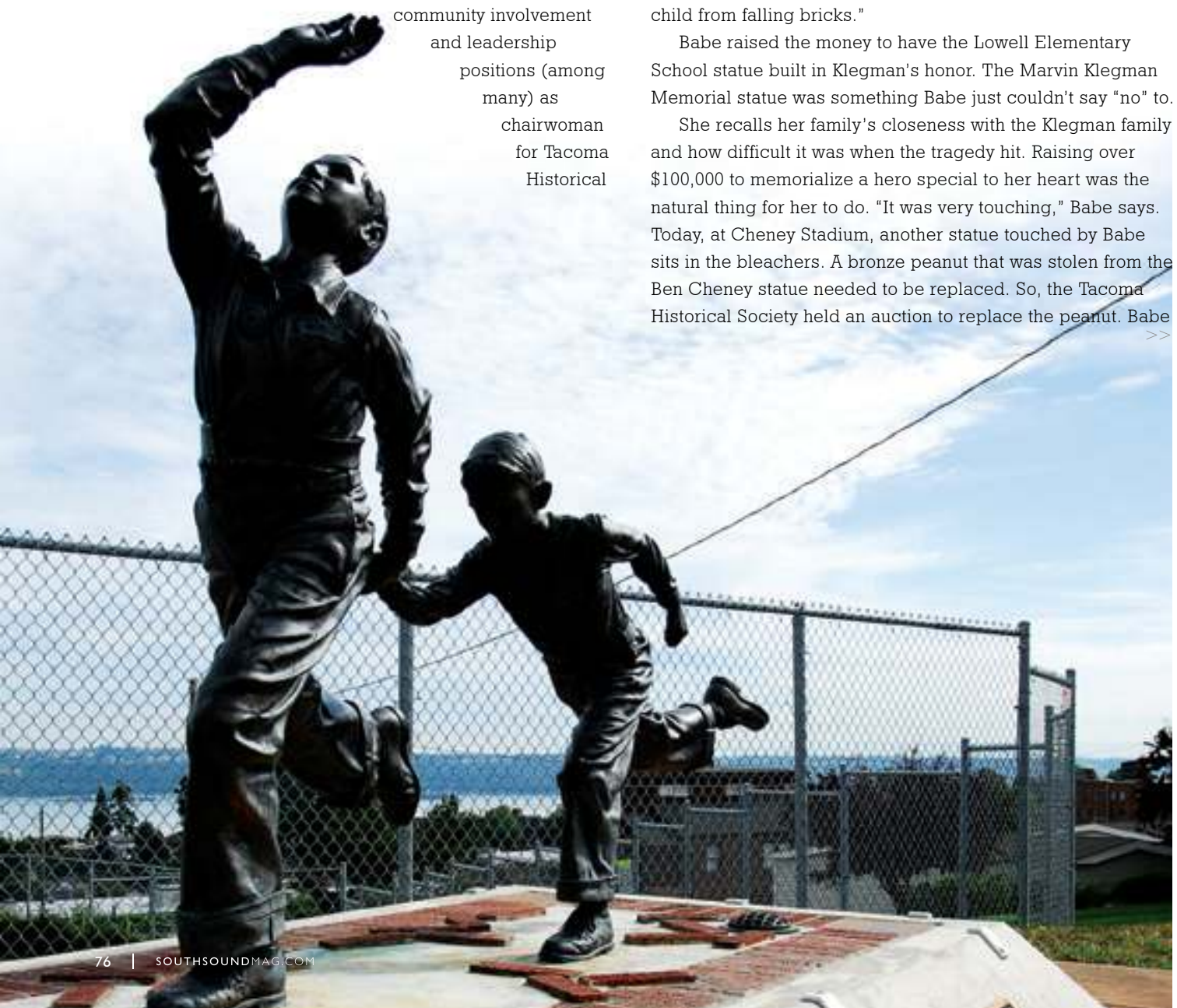
But there's a special fundraising campaign Babe is especially proud of. Frozen in motion in front of Tacoma's Lowell Elementary School, the sun beams down on a bronze statue of an 11-year-old boy urgently grasping the hand of another young boy as they race to safety amid falling bricks in the 1949 earthquake that hit Tacoma.

"Look at the detail. Do you see the creases in the pants?" Pride and emotion reveal themselves in her voice as Babe tells the story. "That boy, Marvin Klegman, saved the life of another child, but in the process, he was killed when he shielded the child from falling bricks."

Babe raised the money to have the Lowell Elementary School statue built in Klegman's honor. The Marvin Klegman Memorial statue was something Babe just couldn't say "no" to.

She recalls her family's closeness with the Klegman family and how difficult it was when the tragedy hit. Raising over \$100,000 to memorialize a hero special to her heart was the natural thing for her to do. "It was very touching," Babe says. Today, at Cheney Stadium, another statue touched by Babe sits in the bleachers. A bronze peanut that was stolen from the Ben Cheney statue needed to be replaced. So, the Tacoma Historical Society held an auction to replace the peanut. Babe

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## BABE'S CURRENT PROJECTS

- Gilda Radner Club, Seattle/Tacoma, also known as "the Little Blue Cottage." A haven for cancer survivors, it will be free of charge to visitors and members. The project is scheduled to be completed by January 2009 near Wright Park.
- Tacoma Historical Society's Goddess of Commerce project. Babe will be raising the thousands of dollars necessary to re-create the statue that was destroyed and used for scrap metal in the 1940s. When completed, the Goddess of Commerce will stand again in her new location, to be determined.
- Tacoma Community College Program for foster children. Babe and the TCC board plan to raise \$10,000 to help foster children earn scholarships and skills vital to working in the job market. Because once they turn 18, support from the state is extremely limited and the board wants to help them succeed and become productive adult members of society.

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laughs, remembering that it seemed like a gag. But by the end of the night, she won the bidding and the bronze peanut for \$450. "So, we went to the stadium not long after and they put the peanut on."

As Babe talks, her voice reveals a kid at heart. Endless plaques and awards dot her office wall, commemorating 20 years of community leadership and service as a volunteer. It's astounding to know that one woman accomplished all this and that she continues to answer the call to forge ahead for bigger and better things for Tacoma. "A new door opens all the time," she says.

When a woman recently telephoned Babe asking for her help to start a Gilda Radner club in Tacoma to support cancer survivors and their family and friends, Babe found herself agreeing again to lead another fundraising project. Gilda Radner was a famous comedienne well-known from her appearances on "Saturday Night Live." She died at age 42 from ovarian cancer. Gilda Radner clubs are found throughout the nation.

"She told me she was just getting ready to go into chemotherapy, and she needed my help. How can you say no to that?"

So, Babe said "yes," and she's currently in charge of the Tacoma Gilda Radner Club under the umbrella of the Seattle chapter, scheduled to be completed in January of 2009. The

"club" is an actual house that will likely be open six days a week, free of charge to its visitors and members. It will be located near Wright Park.

"We've got the house already. We've got people offering to paint. People want to help. This is going to be a good thing," Babe said.

She's known for her knack to get people to give, and though the numbers sometimes go into the millions for the campaigns she chairs, Babe doesn't make a big deal of it. What means the most to her is the effect it has on the people of Tacoma and how it blesses them.

"I don't put anything in my pocket when I do these fundraising projects," Babe explains. "But I get that same good feeling anyone gets when they sell something."

Not a stranger to hard work, Babe doesn't see what she does as difficult. "Fundraising is no different than selling. It's just explaining to people that if they say 'yes,' great. If 'no,' I understand."

In addition to her years of service to Tacoma, Babe found time to author a few books. She collaborated with local author Val Dumond on "Mush On" and "Smile. The Story of Klondike Kate, Queen of the Yukon" and she also wrote "Men, They Just Don't Get it."


Just when you think one woman couldn't possibly add another accomplishment to her endless list, Babe mentions

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her latest thrill. She's learning to play the electric organ.

And as she taps her fingers delightedly on the keys, humming to the tune of "All of Me," she shows her belief that life is a series of many celebrations. Referring to her weekly Tuesday class at Prosser's she says, "It's like dessert when I go."

But Babe doesn't push herself too far. She knows better. She picks the projects she believes in, and continues to do everything in her power to make the world around her a better place. "I know I can't do it all," she says. "But I like being a part of so many positive things." 

*Christy Pessemier is a freelance writer specializing in magazine feature articles. When she arrived to interview Babe Lehrer she was treated to a tour of Tacoma. Now she has a newfound appreciation for Tacoma and its history. Babe's former business, Lyon's Apparel, was not far from the Pessemier family shoe store — Christy's husband Tom's former family business. Now long gone, both were quality stores known in the area for their customer satisfaction and expertise.*

## HELP BABE'S CAUSES

The "Surviving with Style" fashion show and luncheon to benefit Gilda's Club Seattle-Tacoma will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Hotel Murano in downtown Tacoma. Tickets are \$100 each or \$1,000 for a table of ten. Call Babe Lehrer at 253.383.1283 to make reservations.

## BABE'S PLACES OF HONOR

- **Top of the Ocean Monument, Ruston Way, Tacoma (on the dock near the Silver Cloud Inn).**  
Babe raised the funds to memorialize the popular restaurant that burned down in 1977.
- **The Pantages Theater, Tacoma**  
Babe was responsible for many years of service to the theater including the "You Light Up My Life" project, which lit up the exterior of the Pantages, and for raising money for the theater's latest major renovation.
- **Broadway Center for the Performing Arts, Tacoma**  
Babe was involved as an executive board member, among many other contributions.
- **Cheney Stadium, Tacoma**  
Babe replaced the peanut that was missing from the Ben Cheney statue.
- **Marvin Klegman Memorial campaign at Lowell Elementary School**  
Babe raised thousands of dollars to recognize the young hero of the 1949 Tacoma earthquake.
- **Tacoma Community College's Japanese Garden at the Tacoma Community College campus.**  
The garden is named in Babe's honor and provides a tranquil outdoor atmosphere for students and visitors.

