

## Chamber chooses Salem resident as Citizen of the Year

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The Washington County Chamber of Commerce recently held their annual Chamber Dinner on Saturday night, November 3, 2012 at Southern Hills Church in Salem. The event is a chance for the Chamber of Commerce to thank the community for their support, as well as to honor specific people who have worked hard in support of the community over the past year.

The most prestigious honor they have to give is their annual Citizen of the Year award. Every year, several residents of Washington County are nominated who have contributed to the community's wellbeing in some way, whether through humanitarian efforts or raising awareness and participating in events going on around the county.

This year's recipient was Salem resident Meredith "Pete" Peters, a retired teacher and current President of nonprofit organization Outside The Walls. "It feels great...its a big honor", he said of being chosen for the Chamber's annual award. Peters says the Chamber board selected him to join their list of worthy nominees because of his work recruiting and organizing volunteer workers during the immediate aftermath of the tornado that wrecked parts of Pekin and Borden on March 2, 2012.

After Desi Alexander, Coordinator for the Washington County Emergency Management, requested Peters assistance in organizing volunteers for clean-up efforts, he immediately rose to the challenge. "The tornado came through on Monday, and I was out working on Tuesday", Peters recalled. "There was a great outpouring of volunteers." The 29 names on the list Alexander passed on to him eventually grew to 90 people under Peters' guidance.

He would find out where people in the community needed a few extra hands, then sent out volunteers accordingly. But this was not his first stint as a worker during a disaster relief scenario. Peters said he first got involved in "mission-type work" after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and caused flooding in nearby states. "I went to Mississippi back in 2006, and then they came up here when it flooded in 2008."

For now, major disasters are behind the Washington County retiree, and he's been spending his time more recently coordinating local projects for Outside The Walls volunteers to work on. OTW is a completely volunteer-run organization focused on bringing aid to the less fortunate in the community by performing construction work for those financially or physically unable to accomplish the work themselves.

The morning I spoke with Peters, he had just returned from speaking in front of a class of students at West Washington High School taking part in a program called "Construction Technology". Students who take part in this class through all four years can earn 6 college credits through Vincennes University. "They contacted Outside The Walls looking for work," Peters explained. "We got it for 'em."