

## Q & A WITH PAUL PETERSON

*TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.*

*This month is the 15th installment in the series: Paul Peterson, director of the Tacoma Seafarers' Center.*



The Tacoma Seafarers' Center is a faith-based, non-profit organization that provides services to the seafarers whose ships come to the Port of Tacoma. Services can include shuttle rides to local restaurants for some familiar food, to local sights for a little tourism, to a trip to the mall. The center provides inexpensive comfort food like pork rinds, spicy nuts, freeze-dried noodles and candy bars. There is mouthwash, international phone cards, toothpaste, books, bags of chocolate, deodorant, and packs of undershirts for those running low. There is a chapel and computers with free Internet and Skype connections for visiting online with loved ones back home.

### **Q: What brought you to this work?**

A: I love meeting people from other countries. I get the opportunity to meet the world here—seafarers from each continent and 100 different countries. I've been associated with the organization since 1980. I began by visiting the ships in dock and driving seamen to places like Tacoma's zoo, the mall, and the Boeing Flight Museum. I was named director in 2011 after serving as chaplain and the work has led me to traveling to (various) countries. Over the years, (the seamen) invited me to come to visit them. I kept their names and addresses and have gone to visit them to learn their cultures in Indonesia, Singapore, India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. From the hospitality of the seamen whom I have met in Tacoma, I have benefitted from them feeding, housing, and taking me around in their countries. In Indonesia, a perfect stranger with 18 people in his household still found room for me and helped me find my friends. That kind of thing makes me want to give back to them. In this work, when you tell them you've been to their country, it creates an absolute bond.

### **Q: What have you learned about these international seafarers?**

A: For the most part, they are family men—friendly and grateful for the assistance they receive. They are largely from the Philippines where there are a quarter of a million registered seafarers such as export workers, nurses, construction workers, deck hands, and mechanics. Most join the work to support their families; making two-to-three times what they can earn on land. Yesterday, seven people sent a total of \$2,500 home to their families. By law, 80% to 90% of

earnings must go back to families in the Philippines. Twenty years ago, seamen would often spend all of their earnings. Now, seamen wish to protect their family back home.

**Q: What are your challenges?**

A: Having to be in three places at once when ships come in. I can be in two because of call forwarding, but three is tough. The busiest days in the Port of Tacoma are Mondays and Tuesdays. We have more than 20 volunteers here, hosting in the shop, welcoming seafarers, driving our vans. Some days, especially in the summer when we have fewer volunteers, are very busy.

**Q: What makes it worthwhile?**

A: Our contact with about 500 seafarers per month. Seeing the dynamic between our volunteers and the seafarers. One volunteer loves motorcycles. He took a recent Sunday to visit a ship and offered to lend a used helmet to the captain or take him (shopping) to find a new one. Seeing the faces from the Christmas boxes we deliver to the ships in port between Thanksgiving and the Christmas holiday. Because of the Grand Alliance's shipping coming to Tacoma, we have an increase in the number of seafarers receiving boxes, from 1,250 two years ago to 1,500 last year.

**Q: How did Tacoma Seafarers come about?**

A: The Port of Tacoma made land available for a seamen's center in the spring of 1979. Through the generosity of various foundations, churches, and individuals the home away from home for seafarers became a reality and continues today.