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VIEWPOINT

They made Charlotte better in 2016

THE OBSERVER EDITORIAL BOARD

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Pamela E. Jepsen, Executive Director of Supportive Housing Communities, an agency that has worked tirelessly to get some of Charlotte's most hardcore homeless citizens off the streets and into permanent housing and care. DAVID T. FOSTER III dtfooster@charlotteobserver.com



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Each year, the Observer's editorial board searches for the heroes among us who made our region better. This year, we've found people who provided blankets for children with cancer – and financial assistance for their families. We've found people who've helped job seekers and people who gave their time, their passion – and their blood. For all they do, we say thank you!

LYNN EDELSTEIN

When Lynn Edelstein took a tour of Levine Children's Hospital in 2008, she walked out feeling very emotional.

“Here I have a 2- and 4-year-old grandchild (at the time), so healthy,” she said. “I wanted to do something for every one of those children in this hospital.”

The owner of Yours Truly Needlepoint, Edelstein began knitting blankets for children at the hospital. On Dec. 15, Levine received its 9,000th blanket from Edelstein and her army of volunteers. They have woven a similar number of chemo caps for patients at Levine Cancer Institute.

About 500 people have knitted blankets for Edelstein's effort, from all over the U.S. and Canada.

Most of the children treasure the blankets. Edelstein's group made a Clemson blanket for a 9-year-old boy who was a big Tiger fan. He later died, and his parents

wrote a note saying he had that Clemson blanket with him all the time.

“It’s a good thing we do,” she says. “It really is.”

MEG MCELWAIN

Meg McElwain started Magnolia Marketing in 2003, providing marketing, strategic planning and event-planning for clients including major nonprofits. Then, a tragedy prompted her to put all those skills and energy to work for others.

McElwain and her husband, Frank Turner, endured the greatest sadness a parent can face: Their 2-year-old son, Mitchie, died in 2014 after a lifelong fight with leukemia. Since shortly after Mitchie’s diagnosis, the Mitchell Bays Turner Pediatric Fund has worked to help other families whose children face serious illness.

The fund has paid for rent, utilities, funerals and other needs. This year it also started funding a clinical play therapist at Novant Health to help children navigate their challenge.

“Parents need to be there 100 percent for their child, emotionally, physically, mentally,” McElwain says. “If we can relieve the stress of a rent payment, then we’re going to do that.”

Next up: An initiative targeting pediatric mental health. Mitchell’s Fund is partnering with the Foundation for the Carolinas and its Children’s Medical Fund to underwrite a study identifying Charlotte’s most pressing needs in pediatric mental health. A final report is expected in April.

STEVE JOHNSTON

There’s been a lot of talk in recent years about reaching out across racial and cultural boundaries.

Steve Johnston got tired of talking about it. So, for more than a decade, the former Charlotte Observer copy editor has been pitching in as a volunteer at the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum, the venerable weekly civic gathering in Charlotte’s African-American community.

Johnston, who is white, started out by simply brewing coffee after he and his wife’s activism with the Swann Fellowship school-desegregation group brought them to the forum’s meetings. Now he runs the forum’s website, sends out its email announcements and livestreams meetings via YouTube. “Every one of us can identify a place or three where our presence might break down lines that divide us,” he said. “Then begins the delightful work of simply being constantly present – until some of the lines blur, and trust possibly emerges.”

FRED SCHMIDT

After 40 years as a human resources executive at some of America's largest companies, Fred Schmidt of Cornelius knows a thing or two about resumes, interviews, networking and finding a job.

So when he beat prostate cancer, he decided to put some of that knowledge to work to help others. Did we say *some* of that knowledge? Schmidt has spent about 400 hours per year for the past eight years coaching job-seekers. He and the volunteers he has led at the Davidson Career Transition Program have helped hundreds of people land jobs over the years, from mail clerks to CEOs.

He meets with groups of the unemployed, underemployed or just antsy every other Wednesday at Davidson United Methodist Church. He spends many hours on top of that sitting one-on-one with job-seekers in coffee shops, helping hone their resume or interviewing skills.

Schmidt isn't paid a cent.

"The biggest reward you get," he says, "is when someone calls and says, 'Hey, I got a job. Now I can pay the bills.'"

ANN CLARK

Sometime next year, Ann Clark will hand her office keys to the next superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. It's a good bet Clark won't want some big going-away celebration, but she'll probably get one, anyway. That's what happens when you give a place more than 30 years of your life.

In an era of superintendents who don't stay in any one place too long, Clark was a home-grown administrator who knew where she wanted to be – and where she wanted to lead. She got that chance, finally, when the district turned to her after Heath Morrison's departure in late 2014.

In an era where school boards tend to choose bold superintendents with bold ideas, Clark was more efficient than flashy. The former teacher and principal brought a

calm, steady integrity when CMS needed it most, and she advocated thoughtfully for the diversity the district needs to achieve.



And by the way, test scores have largely improved in Clark’s CMS tenure. So have graduation rates. She’s done the job, as she always has, for the district she’s long called home.

PAM JEFSEN

Pam Jefsen spent a busy 2016 grappling with one of Charlotte’s thorniest problems: housing the chronically homeless. As the leader of Supportive Housing Communities, a nonprofit that aims to end homelessness, she led a new push to use scattered-site apartments as a form of rapid re-housing for those most desperately in need of shelter.

It wasn’t permanent housing, she said, but it got needy people off the street more quickly. Leaders in Charlotte pledged in 2015 to end chronic homelessness here by the end of 2016, but the struggle continues.

Jefsen says the numbers on Charlotte’s homelessness problem aren’t decreasing as much as she’d like, “but the infrastructure and the possibilities are looking good because of the work we’re doing as a community.”

TOM HOWARD

Tom Howard gave his first pint of blood 41 years ago at the American Red Cross headquarters in Washington. It took him about 100 pints more to get used to the needles, he laughs.

Now he’s hit a bigger milestone.

Howard, vice president of government relations at Fort Mill-based manufacturer Domtar, reached 25 gallons of donated blood earlier this year. That’s 200 pints, and it’s an extraordinary amount, a Red Cross official told the editorial board.

The Red Cross also says that one pint of blood has the potential to save three lives, a figure Howard knows well. Even more meaningful, perhaps, was an email he received from a Domtar colleague whose son had endured an extended hospital stay. “Without people like you donating, he would not have survived,” the note said.

It was, perhaps, a moment when those 200 pints felt most real. “If I think that one of my donations has helped one person,” he says, “then it’s worthwhile to me.”

REV. OTTO HARRIS

Charlotte learned the hard way in 2016 just how critical it is to nurture the sometimes fragile bonds of trust between police and inner-city communities. Rev. Otto Harris and St. Mark’s United Methodist Church are trying to help with its Pass the Peace Feasts initiative.

The effort asks two members of the faith community, preferably of different ethnic backgrounds, to take two to four youths and two police officers out for a series of meals and conversations. The idea is simple, according to the effort’s website: To reach a point “where each person at the table can say about all others ‘YOU matter to ME.’”

St. Mark’s has been working with Myers Park United Methodist, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, the Western N.C. Justice and Reconciliation Ministries and the Western N.C. Conference of the United Methodist Church. Harris says the effort will continue in 2017.

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