Volunteers of the Year

Every day, volunteers provide valuable services to the Community Kitchen in a variety of ways. While many serve meals or offer a helping hand in the Day Center, others provide practical services that are not always as visible. Regardless of their role, volunteers are essential to our ability to meet the needs of the people we serve.

In April, as part of Volunteer Appreciation Month, we recognized an individual and a group who have exhibited extraordinary acts of volunteer service.

Heather Kwon coordinates our outreach efforts each week by leading teams of volunteers into various camp sites to offer encouragement and assistance. She was instrumental in assisting families and individuals during the recent “Tent City” displacement, and when she is not out visiting a camp, she can be found offering a word of encouragement to people in our Day Center. Heather is passionate about outreach and is actively seeking other volunteers, especially small teams of individuals to assist her in this effort.

Our volunteer base is also largely built of faithful groups who serve on a weekly or monthly basis, many of whom have done so for years. As one of seven founding churches, Saint Paul’s Episcopal has been an important part of our work since 1982. Over the years, their teams have provided a variety of services ranging from board leadership, meal delivery, hosting at Saint Catherine’s Shelter, and providing a bountiful sweet potato crop each fall. Their faithful presence has been felt and greatly appreciated over the years.

Would you like to make a difference, too? Volunteers are always needed for a variety of jobs: serving food, welcoming guests, sorting clothes, building maintenance...and even areas you may have not imagined. Signing up is easy. Visit our website: homelesschattanooga.org and click the “Get Involved” button to discover the many ways volunteers can serve in our community. Through the online service signup.com, it is easy to learn about the jobs and register to serve; you’ll even receive reminders about your upcoming volunteer appointment. Whether you serve individually or as a group, we hope to see you soon!

Visit our website, homelesschattanooga.org, to discover volunteer opportunities and schedule a volunteer opportunity using signup.com.
Thank you to St. Jude School for collecting over 400 jars of peanut butter! Their Peanut Butter Pass involved about 300 students passing the peanut butter from the school all the way to the truck.

In May of this year, the Homeless Health Care Center celebrated 30 years of operation! It all started in 1987 when our director noticed that medical problems in the homeless community were prevalent and untreated. He began searching for a solution and a great partnership was born.

The Kitchen and the City of Chattanooga collaborated in finding a grant writer who pursued a grant for a freestanding clinic (today called an FQHC: Federally Qualified Health Center). The Hamilton County Health Department agreed to be the recipient if awarded, and the rest is history.

The original clinic space now serves as our primary administrative office space (bonus: many offices have sinks since they were first exam rooms). After several successful years, however, the clinic outgrew that space. Following a small capital campaign and several grants, as well as our acquisition of the 717 East 11th Street building, the clinic moved into our space next door to the dining room in 1995.

For the next many years, Clinic and Kitchen staff continued partnering almost as one body. This public/private partnership proved to be incredibly beneficial, as the clinic could offer many services the Kitchen couldn’t and vice versa. Then, in 2013, the Health Department pursued a tremendous grant opportunity that would allow them to move across the street, to their own facility - and most importantly to expand services.

Now dental and vision services would be added to the comprehensive primary care and counseling services offered (all at no charge) to those in need.

From joint case management meetings to joint efforts to end homelessness, the clinic remains one of our primary partners and most important collaborators. We are grateful for the foresight that brought us together in 1988 and look forward to the future.
Tony’s life had spiraled out of control. After a divorce, he left town to start over; then he was assaulted and spent three months in the hospital. After his recovery, he returned to Chattanooga but became complacent and struggled with homelessness for the next twelve years.

“I can only blame myself. I chose alcohol and friends over getting things together.” He tried substance abuse treatment multiple times, but even by his own admission, he would continually sabotage his own success.

“The police would bring me to the Kitchen and encourage me to get help. The staff at the Kitchen, church volunteers, and others were also genuinely concerned. Although I couldn’t see a way out, I finally had to get to a point where I had to stop feeling sorry for myself.”

Around three years ago, at his lowest point, Tony made a change. He soon found employment (which he still maintains), he began losing weight (he was over 300 lbs.), and he became sober. Throughout this process, the words of his father would encourage him - “Tough times don’t last, tough people do.”

Tony has also seen his family restored with his children and grandchildren back in his life. When asked what the biggest difference has been after having been on the streets for so many years, he replies, “Having my own stuff.”

“I’m at peace. I never imagined that all my negative experiences would have such a positive outcome.” He is also very grateful to the Community Kitchen. “The Kitchen saved my life, especially on freeze nights. I could always count on them.”

Thank you for your support. It truly can be the difference between life and death for so many.

Need for Emergency Shelter Remains High

Each winter, we open overnight to provide warmth and shelter for those who would otherwise be on the street with no escape from freezing temperatures. On an average night in Chattanooga, at least 600 people experience homelessness; but the combined shelter bed count, including our own shelters, is fewer than half that number. While the situation is not ideal (with no real beds and limited staff, facilities and funding), our warming shelter sure beats the alternative: no safe shelter at all!

This year, cold weather shelter operated continuously from December 8, 2017 through March 11, 2018, averaging more than 100 individuals per night and providing a total of 9,595 shelter bed nights (this represents the number of people per night added together for the entire period), 10% more than last year!

As shelter was ending, our outreach team sought alternatives. Through a grant from the UNFoundation, workers were able to provide over 100 tents (along with tarps and ponchos) to those needing a place to go when the cold weather shelter closed. Many relocated nearby only to be displaced a short time later. Subsequently, we re-opened the night shelter for 17 days while we worked with partners to find housing for those affected. Today the work continues and the need for shelter beds and permanent housing remains tremendous - stay tuned for more.
My grandfather passed in 2002 at the age of 94. A week later he would have been 95. A year or two earlier, as he chewed on a pork chop at the old Town and Country Restaurant, Granddad looked across the table at me and broached the subject of his funeral. He said he wanted it to be small as there would be no one left to remember him: “I’m old enough that all my friends have died,” he jokingly grumbled. “So, I made new friends and now they’ve died too.” I still laugh a little when I think of those lines; but almost 16 years after his passing, there are plenty who remember him – including my own children, whom he never met.

More than 20 years before Granddad died, six area leaders came together to begin the process of forming the Chattanooga Community Kitchen. What they created has endured for more than 35 years, meeting needs and changing lives for thousands of our neighbors during one of the most traumatic and stressful experiences they could possibly encounter: homelessness.

Recently, one of those founders passed away, the last founding member on our board, at the age of 97. As I listened to the minister at Everett Kerr’s service, I was reminded of my grandfather’s words. Everett had certainly lived long enough to make new friends – more than once even. He met many people and directly influenced a lot of lives. He participated in mission trips. He enlisted in the armed forces. He volunteered religiously.

He might be gone, but like my grandfather, there are countless people who will long remember Everett. They may never have met him. They may not even know his name. But he will have impacted their lives immensely – through services they receive here at the Kitchen; through his impact on their world. Like many others, he leaves a legacy.

And so do you. Every day, you help the Kitchen change lives; you continue the mission that Everett and his cohorts established – a tradition carried on by so many more. The list is so long, I couldn’t even begin to complete it if I used all six pages of this newsletter.

Each day, you have the opportunity to impact the world around you – through volunteering, through daily support, perhaps even through a planned gift. But whatever your personal impact may be on our work, we are grateful. I am grateful.

Thank you for being one of our friends, a friend to those we serve, and a loyal partner in our mission of “meet[ing] the most basic needs of homeless, hungry and vulnerable people in our community while offering a clear path to self-sufficiency.” That seems to me to be a most worthwhile legacy.
Few people have the opportunity to see the Kitchen from the viewpoint of a volunteer, recipient of services, and ultimately, a staff member. Prince fits all three and loves what he does because as he says, “I’ve been there.”

Prince has been a food service employee for the last five years, having first come to the Kitchen through St. Matthew’s Shelter and our job training program. As often occurs with these positions, Prince’s temporary training job developed into permanent employment. Today, Prince’s support role in the kitchen keeps meals on the table and helps the program run smoothly. “One of the greatest parts about what we do is that it’s open to anyone, and it benefits everyone.”

Prince also makes time to volunteer at St. Matthew’s Shelter each month. He uses it as an opportunity to encourage the men who are in situations similar to his, in the hope they can see beyond their circumstances and realize that the shelter is only the first step in getting where they need to be. “I tell them to never give up! The programs work, but it is up to you to make it work.”

“I’m so thankful for all the staff at the Kitchen who have been so supportive. I could never replace the friendship that I have with them.”

Thank you, Prince, for all you do in the kitchen and for inspiring others to keep working toward their goals.

And thank YOU. As supporters of our work, you provide the opportunity for individuals like Prince to find a new start and become self-sufficient.

Thank you to Unum for a successful food drive as well as a tremendous sock and underwear drive!
We value your support and regard ourselves as accountable not only to you but also to God for stewardship of the funds you entrust to us. We are audited by a recognized, local independent CPA firm and publish an audited annual financial statement.

The Chattanooga Community Kitchen is a 501(c)3 organization. Qualified contributions are tax deductible.

Thank you for making our work possible!