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Neighbors provide help for neighbors at Community Action Center

By Amy Wenk



Susan and Van Westmoreland volunteer to work with the Community Action Center to

provide help to people in need. “It just tugs on your heart,” she said.

When Susan Westmoreland began volunteering at the Community Action Center in Sandy Springs, she often was brought to tears.

“At first, it was really hard,” she said about the volunteer job she started in March 2009. “I would come home upset and tell [my husband] Van different stories.”

She works as a client intake counselor at the nonprofit organization. She interviews people who came to the center seeking aid.

She said one of her most difficult cases involved a mother of four who was a domestic abuse victim. “She finally had enough strength to leave that situation,” Westmoreland said.

But the woman didn’t have the financial resources to care for her family on her own. She came to the CAC for help. “She was just so strong, positive. I just wanted to help her.”

Even after the woman received financial assistance from the CAC, Westmoreland would visit the restaurant where the woman waitressed.

“It just tugs on your heart,” she said. “It’s amazing the strength I’ve seen with these people, especially the single women.”

Susan Westmoreland and Van Westmoreland are two of the 200 volunteers who donate their time to the center, often called the CAC for short.

Located on Hightower Trail, the center is an emergency assistance agency that provides needy people in Sandy Springs and Dunwoody with money for utilities and other bills. The center also offers food, clothing and educational classes.

“CAC is really about neighbors helping neighbors,” said Cheryl Sykes, board president.

The Westmorelands recognize the need in the community and are doing what they can to help.

As a weekly client intake volunteer at the nonprofit organization, Susan Westmoreland interviews 10 to 12 people each day to see if they qualify for financial aid.

“We find out their situation and what they are going through,” said Westmoreland, a mother of two, who enjoys oil painting. “Right now, the economy is bad and we are really busy.”

Van Westmoreland, who runs the commercial real estate firm Westmoreland Company, serves on the board of directors for the CAC and has contributed money for the organization's Oct. 16 fundraiser, the Vintage Affair.

"It's amazing how many volunteers it takes to pull this off," Van Westmoreland said of the Vintage Affair. Both Westmorelands serve on the host committee for the fundraiser, which raised \$115,000 last year for the CAC.

"[The money] goes directly back into the community," said Catherine Lautenbacher, chairwoman of the Vintage Affair. "It does bring the community together to support each other."

CAC was founded in 1987 by 10 local churches that wanted to establish an independent agency to respond to neighbors in need. Today, 26 congregations support the organization.

"Our primary goal is to keep you in your home," Lautenbacher said.

The CAC answers 700 calls for assistance a month. The organization each month, helps 85 families stay in their homes, provides 600 visits to the food pantry and gives clothing to 250 people.

"It's probably one of the most important organizations inside our community," Van Westmoreland said.

To volunteer at the CAC, call 770-552-4889 or email [volunteers @ ourcac . org](mailto:volunteers@ourcac.org).

Vintage Affair

- The Vintage Affair is the largest annual fundraiser for the Community Action Center. The black -tie-optional event includes wine tasting, restaurant sampling and silent and live auctions. Yonrico Scott, a 2010 Grammy-winning percussionist, will perform with a five-piece jazz band.
- Proceeds from the event pay for the center's programs. Organizers hope to raise \$100,000.
- When: Oct. 16, from 7 to 11 p.m.
- Where: The Retreat at Villa Christina, 1001 Summit Boulevard in Brookhaven.
- Tickets: \$95 per person or \$175 per couple. Purchase them online at www.vintageaffair.org.

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