

Filling the gaps in health

As we start a new year, leading a healthy life moves up a notch on the to-do list. Our Young Leaders Society hosted a Lunch with Leaders on Thursday with Steve Card, the director of the Dalton Parks and Recreation Department.

Steve shared with the group all the free and low-cost resources that are available to help families stay fit: gyms, ball fields, youth athletic teams, a swimming pool, parks, walking and hiking trails, skate parks, senior programming and much more. Our community has a great quality of life, rich with recreation, cultural and human services. We need to take advantage of these resources and share them with others.

So how does your United Way charitable investment impact health in our community? United Way partners with the Alzheimer's Association, Meals on Wheels and RossWoods Adult Day Services to provide care for the elderly, who are the foundation of our families and community.

Meals on Wheels provides food for elderly who are unable to prepare hot, healthy meals on their own and allows for interaction between home-bound elderly and meal deliverers, helping them continue to live independently. The Alzheimer's Association and RossWoods utilize the Caregiver Relief System to allow caregivers a chance to be able to do activities they could before they became primary caregivers, and to prevent caregiver burnout.

Looper Speech and Hearing Center, another United Way partner agency, provides hearing evaluations and aids to the elderly along with speech services, while United Way agency Boehm Birth Defects Center provides assistance and guidance to families living with birth defects. United Way is committed to improving the health of all individuals and families in our communities by partnering with these organi-

zations.

United Way also promotes healthy behaviors through investments in youth programming: Boys & Girls Club, scouting, Family Support Council, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Family



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Frameworks and Murray 4-H. These programs help keep children and youth physically active, emotionally on track and away from drugs and violence. The hope is that teens will realize the consequences of bad decisions and avoid needing services from United Way agencies like Carter Hope Center, a drug and alcohol residential treatment center.

United Way also assists children with birth defects and those needing speech and hearing services and supports adults with mental and physical disabilities. Here is one success story we are having.

CrossPlains Community Partner is a United Way partner agency that provides services to individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. A partnership between CrossPlains and Shaw Industries in March 2012 created Project SEARCH, a work training program for adults with disabilities.

Eric is a graduate of Dalton High School who secured a job working a few hours at a restaurant. As an individual with a disability, he desired to be more involved in the community and enrolled part time in college and began volunteering with CrossPlains. Eric soon learned about Project SEARCH and was excited to be accepted along with three other young adults as a full-time intern for nine months.

The Project SEARCH interns were

trained at Shaw Industries corporate headquarters with the assistance of a job coach from CrossPlains. Participants practiced for interviews, participated in team-building activities, learned about money management and practiced relating in a professional setting. They each graduated with defined skills, expert references and an understanding of what industry suits their abilities and interests.

After his Project SEARCH experience, Eric received two job offers and chose to work at a local home improvement store as a part-time associate in the lawn and garden department. He loved being able to help customers and meet new people. CrossPlains and United Way investments provided Eric with direction and discipline to overcome his obstacles.

The lives of many children, families, elderly, people with special needs and others are touched by United Way's health-focused investments. Gaps in health services still exist in our community. Did you know that 114 adults with developmental or physical disabilities are on the waiting list to receive supportive services so they may become active community members? Just \$2,500 provides four patients with durable medical equipment like a wheelchair or walker.

So how can you help? It is not too late to help us reach our goal of \$3.5 million and help more people like Eric reach their potential. I invite you to support health in our community by giving, advocating and volunteering. Connect with United Way at ourunitedway.org or by liking United Way of Northwest Georgia on Facebook. To make a financial investment, visit us online at ourunitedway.org/give or mail your check to P.O. Box 566, Dalton, GA 30722.

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