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Frank Walker

Retired businessman now works hard for Michael's Way

By Abe Hardesty • City People writer •
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Frank Walker is a numbers man, an instructor of math whose skills carried him through a long career with three major corporations.

As he moves into the final three months of his second two-year term on the Michael's Way board of directors, he's energized by the nonprofit organization's latest numbers. And he remains passionate about improving them.

By the middle of July, Michael's Way had helped 37 students enroll this year at Greenville Tech to pursue new vocational opportunities. That's one more than the organization's goal for all of 2010, and 18 more scholarships than Michael's Way provided in 2009. And it's 28 more students than were enrolled in 2008.

"We've had a wonderful uphill run," says Walker, one of the most active volunteers at Michael's Way of the Upstate, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income adults find educational opportunities that lead to better jobs and higher incomes.

The quest is eternally uphill because Walker, the volunteer treasurer of the six-year-old charity, needs more money to keep pace with greater needs. Michael's Way, which spent \$8,000 in helping students enroll at Greenville Tech in 2008, spent \$15,181 last year and already has invested \$15,386 in its students this year.

Founded by Greenville resident Steve McDonald, Michael's Way is named in honor of Michael Francis Morrissey, an active volunteer who worked tirelessly to help Greenville's poor and low-income adults improve their lives. Morrissey taught GED courses but recognized that to break the cycle of poverty, more education was needed.

Walker shares that view, and says the rewards of the project are well worth the costs.

"Our partnership (with Greenville Tech) is a real blessing to Tech and to our students," says Walker. "That's the purpose. Part of our mission is to help people get out of poverty, and into a working situation."

The organization has helped 133 students in its seven-year history. Walker laments that he has lost contact with two of them, but he rejoices in the fact that the success stories far outnumber the disappointments.

He stays in contact with several students who earned CNA (certified nursing assistant) degrees at Tech, which has enabled them to find employment at nursing homes and hospitals. He loves to tell the story of a man who earned certification as a commercial truck driver and was hired the day he was interviewed.

"We have one student who is a 21-year-old lady with five children and she's a single mother. That's a tough situation," Walker says. "And we have older people who have lost jobs who need training before they can get another one."

Michele Brinn, vice president of Workforce Development & Education at the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, says Michael's Way "is reaching out to help those individuals who are willing, but not financially able, to take the next steps toward attaining the education and skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century knowledge economy."

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Walker, 72, sees the big picture. A retired purchasing agent, he and wife Betty came to Greenville in 1987 after a career that included work with General Motors, Cummins Engines and Westinghouse Air Brakes.

Sponsorships and tickets (\$50 per person) to '70s Disco Fever are available. Call Kay Friddle (241-0792) or visit www.michaelswayupstate.org for more information.

While growing up in the northwest Ohio town of Tiffin, Walker once dreamed of attending Ohio State University and working as a CPA. Instead he enrolled in the General Motors Institute. His sharp math skills carried him at work for the next 40 years.

In retirement, most of his volunteer hours have been devoted to helping others find success. In addition to his work at Michael's Way, Walker volunteers as a mentor at the United Ministries' adult learning center and has served on the board at Senior Action.

He's also active at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, which is how he became one of the earliest volunteers at Michael's Way. Walker was introduced to Michael's Way through Steve McDonald, a former deacon at St. Peter's Episcopal who remains a close personal friend.

Walker hopes to generate money for scholarships with an Aug. 26 social event that will appeal to a wide range of ages. Dubbed " '70s Disco Fever," the event will feature music by DJ Chris Wagner and food from Sticky Fingers, Panera Bread, Justin's Steakhouse and Saffron's Cafe. The party is scheduled for 7-11 p.m. at the Huguenot Loft near the Peace Center.



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