



"Dedicated to children and those who serve them"



Steven Wayne Dolliver, Editor

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Meet Executive Director Brenda Crellen

Editor's Note: Over two decades ago I interviewed an intelligent and energetic young lady who sought a Therapist position in an outpatient program I supervised on Edgewater Drive in Orlando. Suitably impressed, I was prepared to offer this promising candidate the position when quite suddenly I was tabbed for an executive position with a Specialized Therapeutic Foster Care program across town. And that was that—Brenda went her way, and I went mine. Five years passed. I had just secured a new directorial position with an agency closer to my home in Lake County. I was gradually settling in to my new role when my executive called to advise me that she had just met an "intelligent and energetic" young lady who "would be perfect" for the foster care directorship for which we were recruiting. Pressed for time, I arranged an interview over lunch at a quaint sandwich shop near my scheduled meeting in Wildwood. As I disembarked from my Pathfinder at the appointed site, a khaki leep Liberty slipped into a space two cars away. And, much to my surprise, out sprang the "intelligent and energetic" Brenda Crellen! Fast forward to 2014. After ten years of virtually uninterrupted supervisory relations between us, Brenda departed to assume the role of Clinical Supervisor with LSCAC. From there she ascended rapidly to Assistant Director and in 2018 to her current leadership of the organization. Oh, and along the way she enticed a former supervisor to join an agency that puts children first in thoughts and actions. And, ironically, after all this time I am still interviewing Brenda Crellen today! So, without further adieu, I present to you, Brenda Crellen....



Q1. So, Brenda, let's begin by having you give us a thumbnail sketch of your career prior to becoming the Executive Director with Lake Sumter Children's Advocacy Center. In the process perhaps you could tell us how those professional experiences prepared you for the position you now hold.

"I have been very fortunate to work in the healthcare field for 34 years in various capacities. I truly believe each position was a steppingstone to gain

knowledge and utilize acquired skills. I was introduced to the mental health field through Lake Sumter Community College as part of its career development program. I worked the acute inpatient

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A Positive Thought for the New Year: "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." - C.S. Lewis, novelist, children's author, theologian

From the Editor

On Resolutions and Friendships

Reseo-lu-tion: a firm decision to implement an action or a course of actions for the betterment of self or others or for the greater good

Over time the New Years for me have simply come and gone. And I must admit that for the most part they have passed with scant recognition and nominal fanfare. Sadly, each has become just another date on the calendar to demarcate the current year from the previous. Quite honestly, if truth be told, January I for me provides a welcome relief from the frenzied pomp and circumstance of the prior holiday season. Oh, I realize that this feeling runs counter to the conventional feelings of excitement and anticipation many share with the advent of a new year and the tantalizing possibilities that lie before them. But I have never been much inclined toward the earnest resolutions that others make with such profound conviction this time of year. Somehow, the personal pledges to lose weight, to eat better, to exercise regularly or to get a better job always seem hollow, arbitrary and capricious-and, dare I say, more than a wee bit *futile*. I know, I know...bah, humbug!

But this New Year is different, and I suspect that New Years henceforth for me shall never be quite the same. You see, I just learned the other day that a friend of mine has died. Well, to be entirely accurate, he was a friend of mine. In truth, I had not seen him for some 50 years, which places an emphatic punctuation point on our erstwhile friendship. To be precise, Al and I were friends from another time. We were bound by our youthful exuberance, our good-boy innocence, our high school insecurities and our dreams to escape the small coastal Maine town that had effectively contained us in our early years. For many of those years we were willing captives to sports, and we defined the passage of time by whatever sport distinguished the season. And I can assure you that we and our buddies played those sports with an unrestrained joy bordering on euphoria. In the winter we were beguiled by the syncopated bounce of basketballs on hardwood and immersed in our feckless overtures to defy gravity and execute jaw-dropping dunks. In the spring we surrendered to the subtle swish-swishswish of track spikes actively devouring a cinder track. In the summer we were mesmerized by the crack of the bat and the oh-so-sweet perfume of outfield grass. Then around came the fall with its definitive thump of pads signaling the arrival of football season. The courts, tracks and fields of our youth served as the crucibles of our character in our inexorable march toward manhood. It was in those sacred venues where we learned the value of hard work, the merit of manifest grace (whether in victory or defeat), and the measure of selflessness required to achieve our common athletic goals. Somehow, in spite of our sacrifice, intensity, blood, sweat and tears, we did not bring home the coveted state basketball championship we so desperately sought in the winter of our senior year. So, a

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Meet Executive Director Brenda Crellen (from page 1)

psychiatric care program of LifeStream Behavioral Center, then located at the Waterman Hospital in Eustis, for six years. In the meantime, I was seeking higher education and later graduated with my Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice and Psychology from St. Leo University. My goal then was to pursue a career in Law Enforcement, FBI, Secret Service or similar forensic discipline. During that time my friend and I were among the few women pursuing Criminal Justice at St. Leo, and we were not well received by many of the males in the Law Enforcement field. Luckily for us, two detectives took us under their wing, and we ultimately had a

On Stigma: "[My] friend and I were among the few women pursuing Criminal Justice at St. Leo University, and we were not well received by many of the males...in Law Enforcement."

terrific experience. Among other noteworthy contributions they made to our professional development, they eventually saved us from staying at the nunnery at St. Leo. However, we did serve a brief and inglorious tenure there. The nunnery was a notoriously conservative residence which had a ridiculously early curfew. As I recollect we missed that curfew but once and, as a consequence, we were locked out of our dorm. There was a rather humorous sidelight to that story. Apparently, unknown to St. Leo Administration, the residents of the nunnery had adopted a feral cat, which they eagerly welcomed into

their home in direct contravention of nunnery rules. In our haste to avoid a curfew violation on that fateful night, my friend and I had inadvertently let the cat into the residence. Well, the event sparked quite a commotion on campus! In fact, St. Leo Administration issued a poster urging anyone with info on the transgressor in the "kitty caper" to come forward. And, wouldn't you know it – the "crime" has not been solved to this day! (However, as you can see from this picture, the cat has settled in quite nicely at the nunnery, thank you very much! :)

LifeStream was a great experience and one I returned to for another 10 years after more career exploration. I spent some time

working with good folks at Lake County Boys Ranch in Altoona as a Targeted Case Manager under Martha Ford. While there I met many Department of Children and Families workers who encouraged me to join them as a Foster Care Counselor. I was later promoted to Child Protective Investigator under the leadership of Connie McMasters, an amazing leader. I was co-located with Children's Home Society (CHS). After a few years with the Department, I met Glenna Osborne, Director of the CHS Family Builders Program. I joined her team as a Family Builders Counselor and was later promoted to Family Builders Supervisor. Glenna was my mentor and my friend. She was supportive and encouraged my leadership growth. Glenna changed job roles and joined LifeStream Behavioral Center as the Lake Academy Principal. She was instrumental in my return to LifeStream Behavioral Center, where I spent 10 years in various positions, including Family Care Management Director (Child



"Getting in the habit..."

On Resolutions and Friendships (from page I)

cruel winter segued into spring, and the track season resignedly surrendered to caps and gowns—our high school years thus reconciled to memory.

That summer we worked our jobs, saved our money and solidified our plans for life beyond high school. Periodically, we gathered - Al, the gang and I - to catch up on a sultry summer's events and to relive our pre-graduation exploits. All the while we promised to keep in touch despite the distances that would soon come between us. Summer eased toward fall and the centrifugal forces of nature took hold, scattering us like detritus to the winds. Five of us headed off to colleges dotted across the eastern seaboard, eager to demonstrate our academic mettle. Al, for whom books held no special allure, remained behind to ply his fishing craft in the familiar environs of our hometown. Inexplicably, as the years tumbled in succession from the calendar, we lost touch. I presumed that other priorities had gotten in the way—new friends, new marriages, new births, new jobs and new aspirations. Maybe it's a "guy thing" that none of us reached out to each other. Still, as more years passed the prospect of reaching out became increasingly awkward—what would I say, would my old friends care, could we even relate to one another after all this time? And I wondered to myself if those formative years of our youth were merely an inconsequential "incubation period" - a prelude to the "real life" that lay ahead.

Occasionally, I received high school reunion announcements marking significant milestones in the passage of time—five years, ten years, twenty years since our class's graduation rite. Each time I found a convenient excuse to avoid the heralded event—too busy at home, too busy with work, too far to go, no one will care whether I am there or not anyway—all of the prohibitive excuses. Randomly, in the interim between reunion notices, I found myself reflecting nostalgically on the "good ol' days" when Al, the boys and I played our childhood games and exacted our collective will on all comers. Together, we were certain that we were indomitable. And I suspect that secretly we each deemed ourselves to be nothing short of immortal—superheroes of our fertile imaginations. Then, with just one phone call, I discovered how wrong we all were.

It was an unseasonably chilly Florida day in November when I placed the ill-fated phone call to my brother Jeff in characteristically frigid Maine. We joked about the "oppressive" Florida highs in the low 60s as the mercury dipped toward freezing in Jeff's forbidding neck of the woods. We then slipped comfortably into our usual banter over the mercurial plight of Boston's sports teams, including the "sorry state" of the Boston Celtics. Hardly skipping a beat, Jeff launched into a snappy recitation of small-town life in his sleepy hamlet of Bar Harbor, Maine. I always enjoy his humorous tonguein-cheek updates on what I refer to as "the minutiae of Maine". After a rollicking rendition of insignificant details, the likes of which would be entertaining to only him and me, the hammer fell:

Jeff: "Oh, geez, I almost forgot to tell you about Al."

Me: "Al who?"

Jeff: "You know, your friend Al. You guys played ball together. Didn't ya hear?"

Me: "Hear what?"

Jeff: "Al died last week—just up and had a heart attack and died...."

Jeff continued on—something about AI having been "in the peak of good health and a weight-lifting champion in his age/weight class in New

Child Chat



Meet Executive Director Brenda Crellen (from page 2)

Welfare), Lead Recovery Program Specialist (Acute Psychiatric Hospital) and Advanced Clinician (School-Based Outpatient). I spent virtually all of those 10 years under the supervision of Steven Dolliver, who provided guidance, wisdom and continuous support. I learned many valuable lessons under his tutelage. Later, I met LSCAC Executive Director Diane Pisczek and learned more about the Children's Advocacy Center. At the time I was pursuing my Mental Health Counselor License, and Mrs. Pisczek stated she would keep my info on file for future career options. Several years later in 2014, I received an email from Mrs. Pisczek asking if I would be interested in applying for the Clinical Supervisor position. I have been with the Center ever since, and I consider this organization as my professional home.

I was fortunate to work with Mrs. Pisczek, and I am so forever indebted to her. She promoted me to Assistant Director in 2017. Mrs. Pisczek cared deeply about this organization and helped move us forward to ensure child victims had a place to receive all needed services in one location. Her untimely passing in 2018 was such a shock. I know she is watching over us and wants us to continue to move forward. I keep a note at my desk written to me by Alex Ogilvie, a former board member treasurer who passed away in 2019. It reads, "This is your first day as the leader of that staff and I offer you all my support. Diane was wise in choosing you to replace her and had all the confidence in the world in your ability to take what she has built and move it forward, as do I." I keep those words as inspiration when inevitable challenges present. Although I described my job experiences as steppingstones, the stones themselves consist of Martha Ford, Connie McMasters, Glenna Osborne, Steven Dolliver, Diane Pisczek and Alexander Ogilvie, who helped shape me into the person I am today. I was fortunate to have had such amazing supervisors who believed in me. Thank you."

On Diane Pisczek: "[She] cared so deeply about this organization. Her untimely passing in 2018 was such a shock, [but] I know she is watching over us...."

Q2. What were the most formidable challenges you faced in your first year as Executive Director and how did you surmount them?

"The first year was truly challenging due to multiple deadlines for grants and other time-stamped requirements. I am grateful for my Administrative Assistant Deborah Boutilier, who has 20 years invested in this organization, and my Office Assistant Lillie Vaughn, who has also been with this organization 20 years. I am learning something new every day thanks to them."

Q3. I know that you have a remarkable team of professionals at the Center. In your opinion, what have been the most important accomplishments of the team since you assumed the directorship?

"I have an amazing management team, including Steven Dolliver, Director of Operations; Cathy Carter, Clinical Supervisor; Holly Sharlow, CPT Program Coordinator; and Heather Palasky, CPT Medical Provider. We are small but mighty. My management team has a wealth of professional experience and strong work ethics. Our staff consisting of CPT personnel, Counseling personnel and Medical Services personnel are passionate about what they do and the

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On Resolutions and Friendships (from page 2)

England". At least I think that is what he said...or maybe I later read it in Al's obituary. It makes no difference now. Al is dead. I had waited too long to make amends for my protracted absence from his life. We had squandered our opportunity to write new chapters in our friendship through our mutual neglect. They might have been rich chapters seasoned with maturity, experience and insight—compelling testimony to full lives. They might have been a fitting continuation of a friendship whose bonds were forged once upon a time in youthful exuberance, good-boy innocence, high school insecurities and small-town dreams. I can now only wonder how that promising friendship might have culminated. If only we had reached out....

Early in this New Year I shall receive an invitation on formal stationery as I have so many years in the past. It shall in its formulation request my presence at a very special event: the 50-Year Reunion of the Mt. Desert Island High School Class of 1972. And this year, unlike all those prior years, I shall resolve to attend that commemorative fete with gratification, pride and an indefatigable sense of purpose. For, I realize now that I owe that to my friend Al and all of the others in my class that we have lost along the way. I look forward to renewing acquaint-ances with old classmates who shall perhaps become treasured friends as we travel down the other side of the existential mountain. Most of all, I know that I shall be seeking out four old buddies to swap stories of prior glory and rekindle friendships that never really died. I only hope that I shall not be too late....

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Santa's Curbside Christmas II : A Huge Success

Friday, December 17, 2021 proved to be another magical day at Lake Sumter Children's Advocacy Center. In our premature nod to Christmas, we prepared gifts for 128 children in our 2021 edition of Santa's Curbside Christmas.



You may recall that we were compelled to adapt our holiday celebration for the kids as an outdoor event in 2020 in light of risks attendant with the coronavirus. Just as in 2020 we fashioned a drive-through adjacent to our facility entrance that permitted parents to drive right up to the curb to collect prepared bags of gifts for their delighted children. It is remarkable that every child in every family received <u>six</u> gifts. Though they may have additionally received necessity items (e.g., clothes, school supplies, etc.), the six gifts were expressly earmarked for each child's <u>fun, entertainment and</u> <u>enjoyment</u>. After all, our kids deserve it! And, to their surprise, not only did they receive a glorious visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus, but they communed with an uncommonly friendly Mr. Grinch—imagine that!

Once more the spirit of Christmas prevailed over COVID-19. However, we at the Center recognize that such good fortune does not happen by accident. Consequently, the LSCAC Management Team gratefully acknowledges all of our generous community supporters, our ever-committed Board of Directors, and our hard-working staff "elves" for making it all happen. Thanks to all! You are the best!



Meet Executive Director Brenda Crellen (from page 3)

difference their services make in our community. I am so proud of our team for their resiliency, as the loss of Mrs. Pisczek impacted us all. I know she would have been so proud of all us for keeping the Center open during COVID-19 to ensure our children received needed services in a timely manner. Our doors have not closed during this tumultuous time, and the need for our services has increased. Our team rose to the challenge."

On COVID: "Our doors have not closed during this tumultuous time, and the need for our services has increased."

Q4. You and the Center Team have just completed the "whirlwind" of activity that occurs annually during the holiday period from Halloween through Christmas. For those readers who are not aware of what happens at our Center during that period, would you kindly describe what goes on?

"Holidays at the Center are a joyous time for us to plan our yearly Christmas event for the children and families we serve. We are so blessed to have an amazing Board of Directors and a supportive local community who ensure that our children and their families receive Christmas gifts each year. In Christmas 2020 we instituted what we call 'Santa's Curbside Christmas' in recognition of the risk attached to COVID-19. Rather than confine ourselves indoors, we simply pivoted and took our Christmas 'to the streets'. The "drive-up" event, which we repeated this past Christmas, retained the spirit that makes the season so magical for kids. We had Santa and Mrs. Claus waving animatedly to the children from the front porch, and our staff 'elves' delivered bountiful and festive cloth bags filled with gifts for every child in every car. In addition, each child received a goodie bag of holiday treats and a hand-made wooden toy from The Toymakers as a stocking stuffer. This year we also had a surprise visit from the Grinch, which generated giggles from the children. We are pleased to report that old man Grinch was on his best behavior and even posed for pictures with Santa and Mrs. Claus! Witnessing the joy on the children's faces as they see Santa is so rewarding. And there are those poignant moments that touch your heart. Many parents were tearful, as they reported that no Christmas presents would have been possible in their families without this event."

Q5. Bids 4 Kids, the Center's annual fundraising event, is fast upon us with festivities scheduled for March 12 this year. What goes into making Bids 4 Kids a success every year, and what does the event mean to you and the Center?

"The Board of Directors is instrumental in ensuring this fundraiser is an annual tradition that incorporates several community sponsors. The yearly success of this event helps this organization continue to provide services at no charge to child victims and their families. This year's event will be offered both online and in person, allowing the community to be a part of the bidding process. Naturally, we are hoping that our capacity to create virtual access to our donated articles will stimulate even greater participation in our event. Information for Bids 4 Kids 2022 is located on our website at www.cac4kids.org. We

Meet Brenda Crellen (continued from the left)

welcome your support to make our event the best ever."

Q6. Often, leaders as yourself have been inspired by historical figures whose deeds have resonated quite powerfully for them. Who has most inspired you and why?

"Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl is truly inspirational to me. In his powerful autobiographical work <u>Man's Search for Meaning</u>, Frankl chronicled his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. He described the psychotherapeutic method he developed to sustain himself throughout those devastating events, which subsequently became a beacon of hope to others in trying times. The method involves identifying a purpose in life to feel positive about and then inserting oneself into the imagined outcome. I completed a paper in college on this book. Clearly, Frankl's incredible journey touched my life. The human will is so powerful and complex. I am always amazed by people's journeys through life and their ability to change their outcomes for the better."

On the Will to Change: "The human will is so powerful....l am always amazed by people's journeys through life and their ability to change their outcomes for the better."

Q7. If you could envision what the Center will be ten years from now, what do you see?

"I foresee the addition of a new building of similar dimensions to augment our current facility. That would allow us to provide more specialized services, such as children's groups and parenting groups. It would be helpful to have more space to accommodate Law Enforcement, DCF and State's Attorney Office personnel as well, as many times we work cases in conjunction with those entities. Maintaining grant funding, as well as community donations, will be imperative to ensure that we continue to provide our services at no charge to our children's families. Our ability to do so has been a proud hallmark of our program since its inception. We will also continue to focus on staff development by either providing or coordinating training sessions to enhance skill sets and to refine our specialized trauma-focused services. Finally, we will continue to practice fidelity to the standards set forth by the National Children's Alliance in the interest of Children's Advocacy Centers across the country."

For the "Data Geeks"

Greetings, fellow geeks! Here are just a couple of Center service numbers for your thoughtful consideration from 7/1/20 to 6/30/21:

Number of Counseling Clients Served: 577 Number of Forensic Interviews Conducted: 804 Number of Medical Visits: 613

Do you get the feeling that these were just "space fillers"? Ok, I'm guilty as charged! Mea culpa! (Sorry, geeks!)

Editor's Note: We invite you to enjoy the pics from our 2021 "Santa's Curbside Christmas" on page 6. We apologize in advance for the absence of children's images, as we preserve the confidentiality of our clients for their safety and per HIPAA regulations.

Child Chat

One Door Closes, Another Opens

Editor's Note: After 20 years of dedicated service to our Advocacy Center and more than 40 years in the helping profession, our esteemed friend and colleague Lillie Vaughn is calling it a career. She put her heart and soul into the service of others and leaves in her wake a multitude of restored children and a legion of respectful staff. As a farewell tribute to Lillie, I have asked her to encapsulate her career for our benefit. So, it gives me great pleasure to present Lillie Vaughn "in her own words"....

"I, Lillie Vaughn, was born in Waycross, Georgia to Ernest and Johnnie Mae Brock on October 16, 1954. I was an only child, but being the only child had its privileges. For example, if there was a doll in a store window and I said to my parents that I liked it, it would magically appear at my birthday or Christmas or some other special occasion. Even then, I didn't really feel spoiled. Though I was born in Georgia, I consider Tavares, Florida as my childhood



hometown. My school years were not filled with heart-warming stories, and I never had a favorite teacher. All the teachers I had were "spare the rod, spoil the child" types who weren't afraid to snap a ruler over your knuckles. I remember other things in my childhood that were far more painful than that though. Growing up as a black kid in the South, you noticed things, like having to enter the doctor's office through a back door and having a drawn partition between you and the white folks on the other side. You never really understood it. You just noticed that you were treated differently. But I had my parents and my dreams, and that's probably what got me through it.

I remember liking science in school, which may have led to my later liking for nursing. From the earliest I can remember I always knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a nurse, but even more than that I recall always wanting to help someone. I guess my career showed that. I prepared for it by studying Child Care Services and eventually earning my credential as a Certified Nurses Aid (CNA) at Eustis Vo Tech. I've worked in nursing homes with the elderly and with children at Head Start, Lake County Boys Ranch, LifeStream Behavioral Center, and, of course, with the Advocacy Center. I've always been a "people person", so it always felt perfectly natural to work as a helping professional.

I started with the Children's Advocacy Center in 2000-01. The Center was then located in Tavares, but we moved to Leesburg in 2004. At that time there were only seven of us, including former Executive Director Diane Pisczek. Administrative Assistant Debbie Boutilier and myself. I told Mrs. Pisczek I would do whatever she needed me to do. At that time I was the coordinator of supervised visits between children and their parents. Apparently, I learned a little bit from my "spare the rod, spoil the child" teachers from elementary school because I never accepted foolishness from acting out parents during those visits – even if they sometimes chose to use foul language toward me. You see, I realized that my number one job was always to keep children safe. I am proud that

One Door Closes, Another Opens (from left)

I did so for almost ten years, right up until DCF pulled its contract with our CAC in a cost-cutting move. I was afraid I might not have a job at that point, but Diane must have appreciated hard work and a willingness to do whatever needed doing because she kept me on. That was the thing about Diane Pisczek – she was unconditionally loyal once you had gained her trust. She would find a place for you. One of the things I liked best is that she did not look over my shoulder. She was a stern taskmaster, but she had a softer side, too. When my husband Burney became sick with cancer, I needed to spend more time with him. Not once did Diane tell me that my necessary absence from work might cost me my job. She always told me to do what I needed to do and not worry about work, and I always appreciated that. When we lost Diane in 2018, I knew that I had lost a true friend. I miss our conversations - not conversations about work, but about the things in life that really matter. I miss her every day.

For the last several years. I've worked at the Center as a CNA assisting the nurse practitioner. I've seen a lot over the years in that role - things that would break your heart. I'll never forget the little girl in the yellow dress who was raped. She could not have been more than seven years old. She looked so sad and lost and broken in her soiled yellow dress as she appeared in our doorway. We removed that dress for her medical exam. I just wanted to throw it right in the trash because I knew what had happened to her while she was wearing it. I melted when that little girl asked to put her dress back on when she was done with her exam. The image of that dress still haunts me to this day. And then there were the two wee children. not more than one and two years old. we found unsupervised on the side of busy State Road 301 in Bushnell. Their clothes were filthy and soiled, the result of severe neglect. No child deserves that - to be unloved and uncared for. I scrubbed those children until they shined and dressed them in clean clothes. I wonder what has happened to them since. Yes, there have been many sad stories about the kids we've served. But, I guess I've learned a lot of good things in working with our kids, too - about their inner strength and resilience even in the worst of times. I've also learned a lot about unconditional love – the kind of love children give to their parents even when those parents do not love them back.

It's hard to believe that twenty years with CAC have passed. It seems like only yesterday that I started working at that little program in Tavares. And then there are those other twenty-plus years – all years spent trying to help others, to serve them, to protect them and to keep them safe. I look forward to my retirement and more time with my husband Burney and our three children: Burney, Jr., Cristi and D'andrea. Still, I can't help but look back just a little and wonder if I've done enough. I hope that in some small way I've made a positive impact in people's lives – that I've made a difference. As I walk away I realize that there are so many things I'll miss – the children, who need us so much; the staff, who give freely of themselves; and the program, which gives children a chance to recover. You know, it's really hard to walk away...."

Thanks for <u>everything</u>. Lillie –we wish you the very best in your retirement! We'll miss you! And, Lillie, we can assure you that you made a positive difference every day!









Santa's Curbside Christmas: A Pictorial Retrospective

