

# What it means to ‘Live United’

A few weeks ago United Way of Northwest Georgia President Amanda Burt asked if I would write a January guest column in place of her monthly “Amanda column” for our local newspaper. My answer was of course yes — I rarely say no — so here goes.

Articles such as these normally start with a catchy quote from some historical figure that in some way has inspired us over the years.

This one is no different. President Ronald Reagan (a hero of mine) once said: “We can’t help everyone, but everyone can help someone.” I love this quote and I think about it in the context of the very personal responsibility each of us has to improve the lives of others. From the beginning of our country, communities coming together to solve local problems has always worked the best.

In a world where we increasingly rely on Google for our information (and I openly admit that I do), Google the

phrase “barn raising.”

When you do, you will see it means the collective action of a community, in which a barn for one of the members is built or

rebuilt collectively by members of the community. According to Wikipedia, barn raising started in the United Kingdom and was particularly common in 18th and 19th century rural North America. Frequently a great celebration with song, food and dance would follow the event.

So what does this have to do with United Way? Well for me, the idea of a barn raising has come to symbolize the thought that local communities are always the best prepared and the most capable to take on the problems that particular community may be facing. Huge bureaucracies (I’m thinking the collective “we” in Reagan’s quote) are rarely effective in addressing local community needs ... they aren’t close enough to a problem and are ill-equipped to help (frequently they aren’t

very cost effective either).

This past year I have had the honor and privilege to serve as the board chair for our local United Way. This afforded me the up close and personal view of the incredible generosity and deep commitment that this community has for improving the lives of others.

The other thing that I’ve witnessed is the incredible work that is done daily by the many agencies that our United Way supports. Whether it be Project Search (again, Google this one) supported by Cross Plains Community Partner, or the youth that attend our local Boys & Girls Clubs or the young children cared for at the Friendship House (and there are so many others but I was given a strict word limit), this is where the magic takes place. I just consider myself fortunate to be able to volunteer my service to the United Way board and yes, thankful that I can donate to these very worthy causes through United Way.

I am also very proud that our United Way took on a task of developing a strategic plan for the future this past year. If

it works as we hope, it will not become a “shelf” plan — you know, the kind that gets put on the shelf and never looked at again.

No, we believe that this plan may become a road map for our continued success and one that not only builds on our success of today but also looks forward to ensure our success for tomorrow. Working on a plan like this is sort of like the old saying about making sausage: it’s not pretty at times but we sure do like the way it turns out.

But whatever the future holds, of this much I am sure, this community believes in itself, it takes the necessary steps to help others in order to build a stronger community, it is blessed with great leadership that goes back generations and it embodies the idea that “to whom much is given, much is required.”

To me, that is what is at the heart of what it means to “Live United.”

*Ken Jackson, the executive vice president and CFO at Shaw Industries Group, is the 2018 United Way of Northwest Georgia board chair.*



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