

# Celebrating Our Volunteers

An event born of tragedy inspires a community with stories of caring

By **Kara Patterson**

Each spring, hundreds of residents of Wisconsin's Fox River Valley fill the area's largest banquet hall for an awards gala that celebrates people who make the community a better place by helping and serving others, with no expectation of payment or prestige in return.

The late Paul and Elaine Groth were such people. They were the inspiration for this uplifting annual event called "Celebrating Our Volunteers," though they were never able to attend. The Fox Cities community leaders were killed in a car crash on April 30, 1997, in Green Bay.

A circle of the Groths' friends and contemporaries in philanthropy created Celebrating Our Volunteers to honor the couple's dedication to volunteer service.

The couple had invested their time, talent and treasure in nonprofit organizations, including the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region Inc., Women's PEO (Philanthropic Educational Organization), United Way Fox Cities, local Boy Scouts, Appleton Medical Center, Lutheran Social Services and local Rotary clubs.

"We wanted to make sure that we did something that would renew each year the remembrance of Paul and Elaine and what they had done for the community," said Dick Calder, a member of the Board of Directors of the Mielke Family Foundation. At the time of his death, Paul Groth served as president of that board.

At the Mielke board's next meeting, about two months after the accident, the discussion turned to the charitable footprints the couple had left behind in the community. Calder and fellow Mielke Family Foundation board members Ruth Haviland and Dr. John Mielke adjourned to Karras' Restaurant, a popular gathering spot in downtown Appleton at the time.

"We wanted to help people turn it into a positive memory of Paul and Elaine and get past that grief in a way that would help the nonprofit scene in which they were so much involved," Haviland recalled.



“We thought first we should have a scholarship in honor of Paul and Elaine, and that would have been fine,” Mielke said. “But there were so many facets to Paul, that we decided to have a small committee get together and see what they would come up with.”



The brainstorming group expanded to include then United Way Fox Cities CEO Mark Germano, *Post-Crescent* Executive Editor Kevin Doyle and Community Foundation President/CEO Larry Kath.



Those around the table – and those who came on board later – wanted to ensure that future generations would be able to follow the Groths’ footprints to a life enhanced by the spirit of volunteerism, which the couple had so actively promoted.

The Fox Valley already had the Red Smith Sports Award Banquet, which annually drew more than 1,000 people to celebrate excellence in prep sports and raise money for community sports programs. The group wondered if they could do the same for volunteerism.

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” Mielke recalled saying, “if we could honor something like volunteerism (with an event) that would, at least in numbers, equal the Red Smith banquet and be an important aspect of our community, and what represented our community?”

The time was right to introduce such an event.

“All the nonprofits recognized their volunteers in some way,” Kath said. “But there was no single event that focused the whole community on the tremendous volunteer resources and involvement that this community has. And that really is what makes this community so unique.”

Doyle had been looking for a way for the newspaper to introduce a volunteer recognition event to the community. *The Post-Crescent* included its *Janet Berry Award* – which it had awarded since 1982 – as one of Celebrating Our Volunteers’ categories. The award recognizes exemplary volunteers who enrich the community in the spirit of the late Janet Berry, an Appleton woman who volunteered actively despite the ravages of a rare and debilitating illness.

Aid Association for Lutherans added its *Walter L. Rugland Community Service Award*, which had recognized long-standing commitment to volunteer leadership since 1985. The Mielke Family Foundation created the *Paul & Elaine Groth Mentoring Award* for volunteers who guide and support others. Each sponsor agreed to equal the \$5,000 AAL gave to the Rugland Award recipient’s favorite charity.

Other local businesses followed suit to sponsor awards, including Community First Credit Union for the *Youth Scholarship Award*, SECURA Insurance for the *Business of the Year Award* and School Specialty for the *Volunteer Educator Award*. The *Health Care Volunteer Award*, sponsored by the two major local health care systems, Affinity and ThedaCare, was added in 2000 and the *Hanns Kretzschmar Award for Excellence in the Arts*, also sponsored by Thrivent, joined in 2004.

The inaugural Celebrating Our Volunteers event, which took place at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel in downtown Appleton on April 2, 1998, surpassed the expectations of its organizers. Despite the organizers' trepidation that they would see virtually an empty banquet hall, the event drew nearly 600 people.

"I walked into the room and here were all of these tables at the Radisson hotel, all with some flowers on them," Mielke said. "It clearly was a celebration of importance. The hallways were just filled with people talking to each other, and I walked in there and saw all this and I just got goosebumps. I had no idea what would happen.

"It was sort of a risk, I think. You're going to throw a party, will anybody come? And they came. And they keep coming."

During Celebrating Our Volunteers' first decade, organizers realized the staying power and significance of the event. The initial appeal of the evening grew over time, as yearly attendance increased to about 800 people.

In reflecting on that success, organizers agreed that the event's popularity stems from the volunteers briefly and poignantly telling about their experiences and motivations – what Calder calls "ordinary people doing extraordinary things." After featuring two governors and a Wisconsin Supreme Court chief justice as speakers in the early years, organizers let the volunteers top the program.

"Absolutely, positively my most favorite aspect of the Celebrating Our Volunteers event," Germano said, "is to hear the stories of these people, who never, ever think of themselves as special, never think of themselves as extraordinary, never seek out recognition for what they do. They do this for the opportunity to help their community, to help serve others. Every single one of them has said, in their own version, in their own way: 'Whatever I've given in my time, in my talent, in my treasure, I've received tenfold in return.' Male, female, young, old. To see that reaction, it's very powerful."

The community benefits from the event. Each adult recipient chooses one or more nonprofit organizations to receive the \$5,000 the sponsors donate with the award. In addition to receiving a \$1,000 scholarship, the Youth Scholarship recipients get to designate a nonprofit to receive \$1,000.

Most impressive to Haviland year after year are the youth winners.

“Those are such special people,” Haviland said. “They just make you feel like you’re doing nothing to help your community when you hear about all the great things those young people do.”

Titles and trappings fall away during the event, where people of all ages and backgrounds mingle and celebrate a shared love of making a difference through volunteerism.

“It isn’t necessarily the ‘Who’s Who’ of the Fox Valley region,” Mielke said. “Some of them are well-recognized. Many of them are very ordinary people. You’ve probably never heard about them. I think that’s what makes this so unique and special.”

From the outset, the organizers viewed the event as recognizing those who make a practice of giving and caring. They and many others in the Fox Valley consider that to be a responsibility for all people, not just a routine for the rich or retired folk.

The event, the organizers concluded, is a signpost pointing the next generations of volunteers down the right path.

“Volunteerism, as Paul Groth taught me, is not something that is innate and born within each and every man, woman and child,” Germano said. “It’s something that is taught. It’s something that is learned. It’s something that has to be preserved. The children of today who are 10, 15, 20 years of age, will emulate what they see the 30-, 40-, 50-, 60- and 70-year-old people doing around them. That spirit of volunteerism – which is very, very special in this community and I hope is celebrated continuously for the next 10 years and 20 years and 30 years – has to be something that is taught and nurtured and preserved for a lifetime.”