



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Bills Creek Community Center Medical Equipment Loan Closet



- Free equipment helps people in Polk, Rutherford, and McDowell counties

- The Medical Equipment Loan Closet (MELC) lends out durable medical equipment like walkers, wheelchairs, toilet lifts, transfer benches, and more.
- Many of the items in the closet are not covered by individuals' health insurance, so offering this free of charge is a wonderful service.
- As of June, 36 people had borrowed equipment.
- A 3-person committee runs the closet and 3 additional volunteers gave 60 hours to make the 12' x 28' shed usable.
- Bills Creek spreads the word through area doctor offices, churches, and fire departments.
- The MELC was funded by Carolina Foothills Foundation with a \$25,000 grant.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Buladean Community Center Health Programs that Change Lives

- An on-site health clinic, weightlifting classes, and youth-led basketball support improved health for all ages



- Buladean's Health Clinic is run by a former paramedic and Telehealth facilitator who can connect patients to nurses and doctors. Her skilled leadership at the clinic kicked into high gear in the aftermath of Helene.
- Volunteer instructors lead two co-ed and two women's-only weightlifting sessions weekly. These classes build confidence, improve health, reduce isolation, and lift spirits as people make new friends and cheer each other on.
- Branson Pittman, a dedicated youth, led a summer basketball camp with heart and humility. He taught basketball skills, discipline, sportsmanship, and perseverance, and inspired youth to set higher goals for themselves both on and off the court.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Garren Creek Foundation

Youth Coordinator Inspires Engagement



- Teen cultivates youth participation and leads by example in her official role

- April Skye Lee leads youth volunteers during food pantry prep and distribution with kindness and respect - managing tasks like sorting donations, building boxes, and helping neighbors carry food to their cars.
- She also helps run the Craft and Play Series for younger children.
- She has cultivated a helpful, committed youth volunteer team. Many of them return week after week, inspired by her example.
- Through her efforts, Garren Creek has seen a measurable increase in youth participation, intergenerational engagement, and community trust.
- In total, she has volunteered well over 100 hours in the past year alone, not including the many hours she spends mentoring new youth volunteers and planning events.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Grape Creek Community Development Club Mayor's Rising Stars Program

- Youth get exposure to and support from local leaders to do civic projects



- Grape Creek wrote a grant and organized a regular Youth Game Night hosted in collaboration with Unaka Community Development Club. This success sparked Grape Creek's idea for the Mayor's Rising Stars, an initiative for youth development and leadership.
- The mayor of Murphy and president of Rotary work with the Stars, present lectures on best practices for success alongside other leaders, such as Lake Silver of Rep. Chuck Edwards' office, and attend their field trips.
- The Stars partnered with the local Rotary Club on a trash pickup, the Alzheimers Walk, Shop with a Cop and gathering toys for the Toys for Tots.
- The youth take the lead on completing projects, such as sprucing up a prominent landmark caboose, an accompanying old railcar and the surrounding landscaping to beautify Murphy's downtown.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Laurel Community Center Organization Deepening Collaboration for Greater Impact

- The ability to collaborate, respond quickly, and innovate yields big results



- Inspired by a WNC Communities Coffee Hour, Laurel began collaborating more closely with Madison 4-H. Eventually, they made their STREAM Team into a 4-H club. This enabled them to meet more frequently and without parents in attendance, thereby increasing participation to 17+ youth.
- During Helene, recognizing how stretched the fire department already was, Laurel approached the VFD Chief and offered to take on the role of being a resource hub. They then worked directly with county officials to orchestrate a massive relief operation, taking pressure off their fire fighters.
- Based on this collaboration, the Fire Chief later approached Laurel and asked for help doing door-to-door wellness checks. Laurel volunteers once again stepped up, quickly innovating to serve their neighbors' in-home relief needs.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Otto Community Development Organization Teaming Up with the Arts Council

- An Arts Council collaboration brings in funding, new classes and more people



- A group of volunteer artists wanted to offer free or low cost art classes to the community. Otto proposed a set of 4 classes including alcohol painting, felting, and holiday card making to the Arts Council of Macon County, which provided funding for the materials and help with advertising. All classes were well attended and attendees had a blast!
- The Arts Council also helped to promote Otto's Celtic St. Patrick's Day event, which brought in over 150 people to enjoy an evening of authentic Celtic music.
- Through the generosity of the Arts Council, Otto was able to add a group of local dancers who performed authentic Celtic dances to some of the tunes. Residents loved this free event and no wonder!



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Steecoah Valley Arts, Crafts & Educational Center Junior Appalachian Musicians Program



- Youth music group inspires community culture of volunteerism and connection

- The Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) is an afterschool program teaching Graham county 4th - 12th grade students about their Appalachian musical heritage through fiddle, guitar, and mandolin lessons, and JAM Band performance opportunities.
- Elijah Benton is a star volunteer from the program. His willingness to help has inspired a whole culture of volunteerism among fellow students who do everything from Easter egg assembly, to folding programs, cookie decorating, or whatever is needed.
- These pre-class activities helped the students bond so much that students began supporting each other to overcome performance anxiety. This culture spread to other teachers who began incorporating such activities into their classrooms, and to parents who began pitching in and supporting each other.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Upper Laurel Community Organization Building Partnerships to Fill the Gaps

- Strong partnerships enable exemplary support for food security and the arts



- Upper Laurel's food pantry is a MANNA "Transformer Partner," the highest level of partnership. They offer full client choice, operate weekly, and maintain a Food Safety Certification. 100% of delivery costs are covered through Dogwood Health Trust.
- During Hurricane Helene, this MANNA partnership helped power a 6-day-a-week operation for 7 weeks, delivering food, water, and firewood to over 100 cut-off residents, and creating a powerful, replicable model for rural disaster response.
- By partnering with the Madison County Arts Council, Upper Laurel also brings theatre, music, and art workshops directly to local families. Using their 230-seat auditorium and classrooms, they host concerts, children's theatre camps, and art workshops that boost creativity, confidence, and community connection.
- Since Helene destroyed other venues in Marshall, their Performing Arts Center has become a primary destination in Madison County, offering access to cultural experiences that would otherwise require travel to Mars Hill or Asheville.



WNC HONORS AWARDS 2025

BEST PRACTICES GALLERY

Featured Community

Walnut Community Center Foundation Board's Openness Enables Innovation

- Being responsive and open to ideas enables quick pivots and new services



- Walnut's lively farmers' market generates income for growers, makers, and the center using a flexible, innovative fee structure. They are open weekly, getting bigger, and have live music due to saying "yes" to locals who had new ideas.
- The market established Walnut as a natural gathering place after Helene. The board quickly connected with the VFD to get them to join daily briefings. This galvanized a partnership and new volunteers. They then started a food pantry.
- From there, word got out that Walnut was there to help, and both nonprofits and flood-displaced businesses reached out. Walnut started game nights that enabled a merchant to make income after his game store was washed away.
- They also gave a temporary home to mental health social workers and the Wellness Collective, a group of holistic health practitioners. And they became the hub for pet food for Madison in collaboration with other nonprofits.