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Caring enough to make a difference

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By Jennifer Gill

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Taking responsibility for your own well-being is an ongoing battle for most people. Deciding it is important to eat healthy foods, exercise, get support for emotional issues, while meeting the demands of work and home life requires constant reprioritizing and a real commitment to caring for yourself.

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Caring for yourself while caring for other people is an even greater task that requires a tremendous amount of energy and patience. It also requires financial and social resources.

With the current economic strains, all of these goals are more difficult to meet because both personal and community resources stretched thin.

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The Durham System of Care has been in place since 2002 to help people in need of coordinating the care of themselves, their children and their families. Today, it held its seventh annual "Making a Difference" Community Breakfast and Awards Ceremony from 8:30 to 10 a.m. at the Durham Armory in downtown.

This event is held during the nationally observed Child Abuse Prevention Month and recognizes individuals that exemplify the Durham System of Care values. The System of Care values emphasize helping individuals, children and families to be safe and successful at home, at school and in their community.

This year the event held particular significance because in 2009, System of Care integrated its child and adult services and staff. Now Durham System of Care is focused on the entire lifespan rather than having a split focus of Child and Adult. One of the ways they have integrated their focus are the various Care Review Teams.

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Care Review Teams meet weekly and are comprised of individuals who have knowledge in a particular service area, such as mental health, homelessness or substance abuse. The teams problem-solve how to support Durham residents in need who have come for help by self-referral, or who are referred by a professional. System of Care's framework for organizing and coordinating services and resources can be a lifeline for people who, otherwise, would not know how to start changing their lives for the better.

This year, the Making a Difference breakfast honored five recipients who have taken personal responsibility for helping themselves and others have better, happier, more

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productive lives.

The 2009 Professional Award recipient was Desiree Simpson. Known for working well after hours and using her own resources to support her clients, Simpson provides support for pregnant and parenting teens in Durham. Those who work with her notice her willingness to share resources and to contribute to other organizations whose goals align with her work.

In his role as the chaplain for the Durham Police Department, Pastor Phil Wiggins has brought new energy to the Urban Ministries shelter Care Review team. He is honored with the Community Member Award for counseling clients and supporting them outside of his role on the team. He has recently joined the Durham System of Care Homeless Steering Committee to work on the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness Circles of Support.

Joyce Cromwell, who, after physical illness became temporarily homeless, now lives in her own apartment and volunteers her time to the Care Review process at the Urban Ministries shelter. She is the recipient of the Adult Award.

Honored with a Youth Award, Mercedes Lynn is a young woman with determination to make herself the best person she can be despite the hardships that life has brought her. A participant in YO: Durham, she has gained confidence in learning how to use the bus system to get to and from her part-time employment, and to manage the money she earns there. She is noted for her resilience and tenacity in moving her life forward in a positive direction.

Fellow Youth Award recipient, Tyler Truett, also faced great challenges as he turned 18 and moved out of a group home and into therapeutic foster care. Instead of letting life happen to him, he took an active role in discussing and advocating for youth services in Durham and has volunteered to assist other youth in need.

The award recipients are taking an active role in improving their own lives and others by inspiring their peers and co-workers, and by embodying a collaborative spirit of accountability supported by System of Care philosophy.

The Making a Difference breakfast was made possible by the support of many sponsoring organizations, many of whom are regular contributors to the interconnected and comprehensive network that is System of Care. They are: The Durham Center; M

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