

## Founders

In studying the course of the beginning of such a human enterprise as Care & Share of East Lyme, it is common to discover this immense expenditure of time and energy leaves little leeway to establish a precise and detailed written record of the events and efforts, as they unfold in real time.

On a larger scale and over centuries of time, historians refer such beginnings as a time that is the subject of oral history and traditions. While a short decade or so is modest in the extreme, a history of Care & Share may have its own sliver of oral history to consider, where memory and conversation are paramount.

The 1989 inaugural season of Care & Share abounded with seeking material and monetary donations to outfit, assemble, and deliver food baskets for eight families in East Lyme. It is amazing that the four founding mothers of Care & Share and their husbands tackled all that within their frenzied holiday season activity at home and in business. Right from inception, they set the tone for characteristic hallmarks of Care & Share: personal sacrifice, and thinking of others, and turning to the community for help and support.

In telephone conversations shared in 2025 and 2026 for the creation of this website, the Founders generously reflected upon those times.

*From conversations with the Founders . . .*

As January 1989 dawned Gail Lundin, Connie Rue, Wendy Wasserman, and Debbie Mandel were business professionals active in the community. They were members of the East Lyme Chamber of Commerce. By January 1990 they were community activists in East Lyme apart from the Chamber of Commerce.

Gail and her husband owned Niantic Awning. Connie ran a book store. Wendy was an advertising executive selling space in popular coupon books. Debbie was a counselor at Chrysalis. The women knew of each other from their presence in the Chamber and as their business paths crossed. They related that they neither socialized nor considered themselves to be friends, as the noisemakers and souvenir eyeglasses of New Year's Day 1989 went silent and were put up on so many shelves.

But that began to change according to Gail when Debbie spoke up at a Chamber meeting. She sought to know whether the Chamber of Commerce could help people in the community who needed food assistance. Eventually she was told that wasn't an activity the Chamber could provide. As Wendy recalled, "The Chamber said no, so we did it."

Gail said that was when the four of them began to meet for breakfast at the Seashell Restaurant (where Belle Aurore is today). Over those meals a sense of purpose coalesced, and they chose the name Care & Share for their dream and, according to a C&S twentieth anniversary article in *The Lyme Times*, selected the seashell for their emblematic logo. Their discussions became plans and their plans begot actions. And the actions quickly involved others they asked—who then offered and delivered help.

A future associate in their endeavors, Mae Hills, provided the names of eight families familiar to her and her fellow school nurses as good candidates for assistance that first C&S Thanksgiving. On the phone Gail reminisced: A local tennis club provided eight turkeys. Children from the Niantic Center School and friends collected household paper goods. Middle schoolers contributed health and beauty aids for personal hygiene.

Gail noted the winter season was a time that Niantic Awning did not make much use of their sail shop. That open work area was perfect for receiving and assembling those donated contributions. And so were mid-wived Care & Share's inaugural Thanksgiving baskets, in what was to be the first Pantry location for the newborn enterprise.

A short time later another partnership blossomed. For years, the Lions Club had previously worked with the town and school nurses to acquire similar family identifications for receiving Christmas meals. As Care & Share achieved credible recognition, C&S and Lions worked together to provide and distribute holiday baskets.

In those first two years, all the food and baskets were delivered to the recipients' homes by the founders, with their husbands' help. The Sail Loft was used as a collection and distribution point only, with no clients arriving. Wendy had experience in this from her husband's church, which had a food cabinet and collected the congregants' donations once a month. Her "day job"

involved going to advertising clients' businesses, so she also became the most mobile of the founders on a day-to-day basis. As far as strategic planning was concerned and formal organization, she characterized it this way: "I guess together we figured out what to do."

Gail recalled that Liberty Bank and C&S provided wish lists that banking customers used as references to buy and donate holiday wrapped gifts for children and adults. Learning as they went along, C&S asked in subsequent seasons for unwrapped gifts, to avoid an impersonal catch-as-catch-can feeling and to assure better recipient suitability to the gift-giving. That, of course, required C&S requests for donations of wrapping paper, bows, ribbons etc.—to which supporters responded well, either in kind or cash.

An intriguing personal story evolved right before Santa's C&S helpers' eyes. A woman who was home-baking cookies to make ends meet appeared at the gifting site—which the Sail Shop was still doubling as at the time. She asked for help in wrapping the presents she sought for her children. She confessed she did not know how to wrap them, because she had never received presents as a child and, as an adult, had never been able to afford gifts for her own two children. She was not wearing a coat. While the presents were being wrapped, Connie went home and got the woman a coat to wear. Wendy said, "that's when we started asking for coats as well as food to be donated."

The event and woman were memorable. Two years later, that mom returned, having gotten her family back on their feet. She came to bring a gift of five dollars for Care & Share to use to get something for someone else.

For the Founders, what was first a sensed concern for others was fast becoming a felt concept of self. Persons benefiting from C&S donors and generosity were elevating the experience. Making it mutual. It was becoming very clear that, within the mission of Care & Share, it was not only the recipients whose hearts were being changed.

The business acumen of the Founders proved critical to Care & Share. They knew how to word and place advertisements about assistance and to make the existence of C&S known, as Wendy pointed out, "We took ads in papers . . . who we were . . . where to call . . . how we could help. The response was unbelievable," she exclaimed, citing examples of needs that surfaced and were addressed:

She spoke of a dad who was living alternately in his car and in a motel room; he had custody of his two children. It was two years before he was able to move into a house, getting by with food and meals from Care & Share in the meantime.

And there was a time she and her husband brought gifts and cartons of food to a family with several children in a small house near the water by Black Point. There was a fire in a fireplace . . . a little girl on a couch under a blanket . . . and the mom excused herself to go to give a sick child some medicine. As soon as she and her husband Tom left, Wendy called Debbie. At the beginning there was a basic principle to the C&S program. Two board members had to agree on serving a special need. After they spoke, C&S arranged to fund a home heating oil delivery to that family.

On the phone, Gail had explained that the Founders never asked why there was a need expressed. She affirmed that the Founders worked on an honor system. They let their instincts counter what some on the sidelines warned against as potential fraud. She portrayed their approach as “you just have to trust.”

Care & Share received monetary donations as well as goods and foodstuffs. After a full season there was money left in hand. The idea surfaced that helping families out, especially in summertime without school lunches and class time, would “give mom a break.” And so were born the first scholarships for summer camp from Care & Share—dubbed affectionally as “camperships,” to Parks & Recs programs held at town schools.

Even at the beginning, Care & Share tended to needs of persons living in Morton House. A grandmother living there sought gifts to give her grandchildren, but wanted none for herself. Another resident was always cold and asked for only one thing – some socks. After a few years they got themselves into a better place and said to give their apportionment of food to someone else who needed it instead.

The accuracy of oral histories are plagued by faulty memories sometimes, albeit good will abounds. What is startling, however, is when more than one person, not in the presence of the other(s), recounts an event in almost total agreement. That happened in separate phone calls with the Founders—vanquishing doubt and holding the event’s credibility up in importance.

Such an instance provides a landmark lesson to all, nestled in the early C&S annals.

A husband and wife Founder had made a Christmas delivery. After each set of deliveries in those days the group would assemble to compare notes and “debrief” as the expression goes. The husband told the others, “I don’t think I can do this any longer. I delivered to a house bigger than mine, and they had a boat in their driveway. I don’t have a boat.”

Those in the group who had approved the family for assistance explained. The husband of the family had been a well-compensated senior employee at a major company in the region. His wife had contracted cancer. His daughter needed surgery and he was keeping her at home without school. Insurance only partially covered the family’s medical expenses. He lost his job because he missed so many days of work caring for his wife and daughter. In the recession, he could not find a buyer for the boat and without his salary he could not meet his substantial mortgage payments. He was really struggling.

The paradigm of those Care & Share was presumed to help simply did not include this family. And yet, they were desperate for any help that could come their way. This saga demonstrated vibrantly that outward appearances were not always obvious, and certainly not indicative of the full story of why a person’s or a family’s need was deserving of Care & Share’s consideration and assistance. The founders always checked and verified when such a disparity arrived at their door. And as one of the founders said over the phone, what they learned in those early years was that “everyone has a different story.”

Institutionally, Gail cited that her husband’s minister came forward to assist the seniors at holidays while Care & Share attended to children and families.

As the first years or so went along, vacant spaces for a seasonal collection depot or pantry seemed to be made generously available temporarily. From these, Care & Share continued to make holiday deliveries. Wendy had the numbers in her memory and tallied them, “First there were 8 families. The 8 became 18. Then it went up to 40. Mitch’s Market donated turkeys: 12 ...18...35. That was a lot for four people. And then two more people joined in while we were still driving around town to conduct collections and make deliveries.”

*In others' words . . .*

Eyewitness accounts are the bane of police investigators and historians. Yet they serve a crucial purpose. One person may provide information the other didn't. They remind us that two different people may be present at the same event, and yet see or understand something different, or differently.

Is it because of where they were standing or sitting? Is it their eyesight? Or is it in their minds that received the eyes' electrical impulses? Or is it that their hearts were not in the same place to begin with? It's certainly hard to tell. But each witness contributes to our understanding. So, as an aside of sorts, the following are offered as recollections of the Founders as others perceived them so many years ago. They offer a context—from different angles—of the life and times of 1989 and the immediately following years in East Lyme, southeastern Connecticut, the country, and the world.

And perhaps the landscape of the human heart.

In August of 2025, C&S historian and former board member and office holder, Jan Logozzo, initiated correspondence with a long-time C&S supporter and acquaintance about his connections over the years with Care & Share. Mr. Paul Formica, known to many residents as a local and state legislator and founder of Flanders Fish Markets, wrote in one message:

I was president of the EL Chamber of Commerce back in the early 90s serving with some wonderful board members. One of the committees we formed was to focus on helping folks in town who needed help. The four ladies who were appointed/volunteered became a strong and closely-knit group. Connie, Wendy, Gail, and Debbie were just the perfect founding leaders! The committee peeled off from under the Chamber within a year and became known as Care & Share!

I believe that their first home was a little brick building that the Dousis family owned behind what was then Friendly's downtown.

Quickly becoming a staple of support during the holiday season, the need became more apparent and the group began outgrowing space after space. We were in, or just out of, recession in the early 90s and EB was struggling with low employment hovering near 6,000, which was said to be the critical mass to keep the sub manufacturer operating. As fortune would have it, the Mashantucket Pequots opened Foxwoods about this time and some of the people were able to find work in the Hospitality industry to make ends meet. The need still grew and the C&S group moved from place to place, operating from mid-November to the New Year supporting families in town. One season we donated the small house in the Fish Market parking lot for them to use.

I was elected First Selectman in 2007 and one of the projects we embarked on was a new Public Safety Building. Moving Public Works from the old location opened up in my mind a space which became, and should be a permanent home of Care & Share.

I thought there could be a potential for expansion there as sadly the need keeps increasing for public support. As it turned out, the administrators after me continued to support Care & Share's location there.

There has been a tremendous amount of support from the community to volunteer their time and talents to keep this great organization moving as well as from the many groups who have chosen C&S for their fundraising efforts. Care & Share is a great and necessary organization and until we can put it out of business by eliminating its need, we should do all that we can to insure its daily success.

Longtime Lions member and East Lyme resident, James Curley, related the conjunctive alignment of the Lions Club of East Lyme and the founding of Care & Share. In a phone conversation, he related how the Lions in East Lyme had a fifty-year-long holiday tradition of buying and assembling components of a Christmas meal basket in members' homes; subsequently distributing them the Saturday before Christmas to designated needy families in Town. Early on, they relied upon the Town Constable (Resident State Trooper) to provide names and addresses of appropriate recipients. That task fell to the Visiting Nurses when the nature of town policing changed.

As the Nurses gradually interacted with the Chamber of Commerce Committee at the inception of Care & Share, Mr. Curley went on to explain that the Lions continued to assemble baskets, but came to rely on Care & Share to identify local recipients and to make the deliveries to their homes. That seasonal bonding of effort between Lions and Care & Share was very complementary to their skill sets and missions. It continued well into the future and expanded to include other events and activities.

Another Lions leader who interacted with Care & Share quite significantly was Jim Harris. His name and persona are synonymous in Care & Share circles as the adult mentor for the young men and women of high school age who participated in the Lions International youth group, The Leos. He speaks with great pride of the Leos. He emphasizes an abiding Leo presence for almost the entire twenty-first century in fund raising for Care & Share, through pasta dinners, bake sales, raffles, bottle and can redemptions, and other community and school related functions. He credits many interactions the young Leos have with adult Care & Share volunteers as providing formative examples to emulate.

And now, back to the Founders . . .

### *Help and transition . . .*

Many persons involved in starting Care & Share in East Lyme and their contemporaries were very familiar with the international musical pioneers, The Beatles. Those Brits were often referred to as the Fab Four. Two influential persons in their development and maturation were Brian Epstein and George Martin. Those men helped arrange the music, played on some of their albums, and did much of the advance work and publicity to establish contacts that proved invaluable to the ascendancy of the band. For those efforts, they were interchangeably called the “fifth” or “sixth” Beatle.

Care & Share had its “Fab Four,” the Founders. But they also had two early-on instrumental associates, who Founder Gail Lundin referenced as, “after we four, there were five and six.” She was speaking of Betty Purvis and Mae Hills.

Regrettably, the writing for this website portion of the C&S Historians project only began in the autumn months of 2025. Interviewing persons connected with Care & Share’s origin and early days began only in December 2025. Just mere months beforehand in July and August, the fifth and sixth Care & Share principals, Betty and Mae respectively, passed away. Just as their families, friends, and town were bereft at their death, this Care & Share history lacks what it could have become with their direct contributions.

During the historian and founders phone conversations in 2025-26 for this history, Wendy (Wassermann) Collins explained the transition from four founders to others in this way, saying, “It just had to be done. It had to be because we saw the need. People started joining in.”

She acknowledged the essential contributions of Betty Purvis and Mae Hills. She recalled they came on board within a year or year and a half after that first holiday season. She credited them with following through, “They took Care & Share to the world.”

President Jim Hall and his wife Steffie recalled Betty for this look back at her contributions:

Steffie and I knew and worked with Betty primarily prior to 2012. Our principal efforts with her were in Betty's program to collect day old bread and other baked goods from local grocery stores and bakeries and box it up for families. Our contribution was to pick up boxes of it on Friday mornings every other week and deliver it to families on her list. There were 6 to 8 families on her list usually. I think that Brian and Carolyn Gough did deliveries on other weeks.

Jim and Stefanie Hall

Another quintessential Care & Share active member, past president and a member of the historians' committee, Jan Logozzo also wrote about Betty:

While I never worked side by side with Betty, I had many occasions to observe her at numerous Care & Share meetings.

What did I observe? Betty had an engaging personality and great spirit and there was no question that she was the heart and soul of Care & Share. Betty had wonderful and innovative ideas and yes while she was a force to reckon with while implementing them, the processes and programs always worked out!

Betty had heartfelt consideration of others and her dedication to that end is why C&S is as successful as it is today.

Jan Logozzo

The historians are very grateful for the memories of Betty Purvis that her daughter, Joy Timbs, shared in this email of early in 2026:

Hello Historians,

Thank you for your kind words regarding my mom, Betty, and for your efforts in documenting the history of Care and Share.

I wish that my sister, Jill, and I could offer a treasure trove of information, but we just have a few memories. All of Betty's children, with the exception of one, moved out of Connecticut in the early 80s. Mom was widowed in 1986 and it was at that time that she retired and started volunteering full time within the Niantic community.

She had a hand in just about everything. She was especially proud of her work with Care and Share. As I recall, all donations pretty much went through her garage on Riverview Road. She had tables set up and an extra large freezer and refrigerator. When visiting, someone was always dropping off or picking up donations for delivery. She had set runs that she would make herself to the A&P and Starbucks. My sisters and I, when visiting, would often help with pickup and deliveries to New London and all over East Lyme. The back of her car was always covered in sesame and poppy seeds from the bagels and breads. I know that she also had to send a report to Starbucks to document their donations.

She was thrilled when the town offered the new building for its headquarters and storage. She was a constant figure there, and everyone knew that Betty had a process. She could be a drill sergeant for sure! I vaguely remember the boxes for Thanksgiving. I think they still used her freezer for extra turkeys. I believe she also donated the freezer when she moved out of her home.

She had to stop her work at Care and Share due to a compound fracture of her ankle in January of 2020. Between covid and her being homebound, she gradually gave up even the phone calls.

We will look for photos but can't verify that they would be Care and Share volunteers. Like I said, she was involved in so many activities.

Hope this helps a bit.

Thank you again,  
Joy Timbs

When people refer to a person as “a force of nature” it is customarily thought of as a complement spoken in awe. Betty Purvis’s C&S colleague, Mae Hills, embodied that image for many people, for many years.

But nature hasn’t a purpose for its relentless power, beyond a preservation of balance and regeneration. It is largely impersonal, with no heart or soul, except those assigned anthropomorphically by poets, dreamers, philosophers, and, perhaps, meteorologists—who speak of the “eye of a hurricane.” Mae Hills could be that swirling hurricane; but just as often she was its eye.

In their tumultuous years of 1980 to 1998, many a school-aged East Lyme child was put at ease by Nurse Hill. Her ministrations often calmed the stormy surroundings of noisy cafeterias, fast-moving corridors, frenetic playgrounds, nerve-shattering classrooms, and atmospheres of peer pressure.

She spoke of those years to Michele Royce for a feature article in *The Lyme Times* column, “In the Limelight,” shortly after retiring from school nursing. “I just think young people really keep you feeling young. It keeps you up with the times.” Mae continued, “I had such a special relationship with the kids because I knew them as little kids and into middle school and high school.”

You can just imagine.

Countless gently applied band-aids to tear-streaked primary graders. Numerous non-judgmentally dispensed medications to inattentive middle graders. Untold occasions of supplying hygiene products to embarrassed, or instructions to confused, junior high young ladies. Myriads of discrete advice, sought nervously by insecure high school boys.

All transpiring in the safety and confidence of the nurse’s office, or beyond. In the words of columnist Royce, Mae Hills “became a person they could confide in and trust.”

So, it made ultimate sense, with no surprise, that when the four founders of Care & Share looked for a person who knew the children and families of East Lyme in need of assistance—there was Mae Hills. Ready and rarin’ to go. And go. And go.

After she retired from school nursing, that familiarity carried over, into Mae's volunteer work in the community—a large portion of which was as part of Care & Share, with whom she was already volunteering. When the eleven-year-young organization was looking to nominate a new president after Founder Debbie Mandel, it turned to Mae Hills to usher in a new century.

Mae built on experience from her nursing years, during which many East Lyme adults—parents, teachers, staff, business people—got to know her. Calling on them all, Mae released a different force of her nature. Now the treasured presence for children in the eye of the storm swirled as a dervish around town, and into neighboring towns as well. On behalf of her new constituency, she swept those same adults up with her enthusiasm. She also injected a second generation of Care & Share leadership with an infectious spirit.

This advocate for the clients of Care & Share was almost impossible to deny when she sought help and encouraged other C&S volunteers to ask for the same. One of the founders related Mae would go hunting for toys as gifts for the Holiday Store. Since there were no toy stores in town to approach, she said Mae once went into a pharmacy displaying toys for Christmas. As the story goes, Mae charm-talked the manager out of a few toys as “gift donations.”

Without reluctance, Mae approached other organizations for help or to form partnerships. Looking back for the historians, Lions leadership of the day credit Mae, during her school nurse days, with forging the first links of the chain between the two organizations—maximizing each one's strengths and compensating for each other's weaknesses—over holiday baskets. Together the two groups have done marvelous things for the people of East Lyme and beyond, as each one did and still does separately in its own right.

Mae's involvement in Care & Share was long from being over when she turned the gavel over to Barbara Buzzelli after her two-year term. As she told the *Lyme Times* columnist in “the small Grand Street office used by C&S:”

“I think that people genuinely want to do things to help other people. Sometimes they do not know how to do that and this . . . [C&S] . . . gives them a vehicle. This thing is just growing and growing. It's got a life of its own.”

*Years later into that century . . .*

Founder Wendy Collins told the historians of her relocating to Texas in 2001 to be near one of her sons. She said she thought the other founders “moved back a bit” from active roles in Care & Share at about that time. Wendy kept in touch with things in Care & Share and East Lyme through the monthly newsletter from her church in Niantic.

She related a rather poignant story.

Earlier in her childhood years, she lived behind what was then the Junior High School. In the years of the mid-twenty-teens she made one of her return trips to Niantic. At the time, the EL High School archeology club was doing a dig near where her home had been. The club had uncovered a silver cup. It was engraved with the name Wendy Jill. They cleaned it up, polished it and began investigating, as archeologists (and historians) are accustomed to do. They learned their “find” belonged to a “founder.”

Wendy told the C&S historians the club had found her “baby cup” she must have left long ago in her backyard after digging in the dirt. There it remained, buried and hidden for oh so many years. Returned to Texas with her, the cup now holds a place once again as a treasured family heirloom for Wendy, who knows the values of our youngest years may be buried for a time, but they have a tendency to rise to the surface when they are needed in our adult years.

Wendy Wassermann Collins, who said of her involvement with founding Care & Share of East Lyme, “. . . it was one of the best things I did with my life.”

Who would have thought, on New Year’s Day 1989 as the noisemakers went silent and the goofy round souvenir eyeglasses were being put up on so many shelves, that four women were about to make their own particular brand of noise and provide a vision for East Lyme that was hitherto unseen.