

Community Involvement

The longevity of service rendered by Care & Share of East Lyme was in part due to the involved presence of its volunteers in broader celebrations of the entire community and its citizens. During these events of high visibility, Care & Share volunteers had borne witness to its clients' needs, reminding the general public that there were persons and families in East Lyme and Salem who truly required their assistance and compassion. These were moments not of Care & Share's design and instigation, but rather highlights in the life and times of East Lyme and Salem. These were events that signified civic pride and belonging—demonstrating the best that these towns had to offer residents and visitors alike.

On October 17, 2004, C&S supported the Community CROP Walk. Designated as a sponsored public event for citizens acknowledging that Southeastern Connecticut was challenged by hunger and food insecurity, Care & Share promoted the event and had volunteers who participated by walking and who sponsored walkers. C&S was also one of the hunger-fighting groups to benefit from donations received subsequently from the event organizers.

Annual hallmarks in the early years of Care & Share were participation in East Lyme Days along Main Street in the summer and The Annual Light Parade along Main Street in Winter.

EAST LYME DAYS

As early as 2004, Care & Share volunteers led by Vince and Diane Martin, featured a fan-favorite pair of booths along Main Street. Dubbed "The Diamond Dig" it grew to be recognized as a not-to-be-missed-spot for fun and engagement during East Lyme Days.

The Dig was a collaboration of Care & Share and the local merchant who provided the "gems & diamond" for eager prospectors to discover. Northern Light Gems was a long-term Pennsylvania Avenue retailer, whose owner and jeweler, Antonio Suarez, graciously contributed centerpieces that were indispensable to the success of the activity and event.

This joint venture, repeated year after year for many summer seasons, exemplified the cooperation and partnerships between businesses and Care & Share that were intrinsic to the organization's successful growth and recognition in the mind and hearts of the people in the region.

Care & Share's involvement in the 2005 version of East Lyme Days featured the Diamond Dig and a booth with games and activities for younger kids.

A Press Release issued by C&S President Barbara Buzzelli at the end of July in 2005 provided a detailed description of the East Lyme Day Care & Share Diamond Dig, while announcing a diamond winner for the third year in a row. She wrote:

The Diamond Dig consists of a child's wading pool filled with sand, zirconiums, and one real diamond. Participants scoop the sand and see what their luck might bring. Many go home with zirconiums, and though not the real thing, they do provide joy and the pleasure in creating their own treasure.

The Diamond Dig generated a human-interest story a year later in 2006. When the booth was disassembled, it became evident that the real diamond donated by Northern Gems, had been "mined" by a lucky winner. But no one came forward with the big prize – a \$400 diamond. It was only later in the year, that C&S used a *Lyme Times* article about Care & Share to urge East Lyme Day "miners" to check their pockets "because you never know what you might find."

It wouldn't be until the cusp of 2007 arrived that two events coincided: a five-year-old New London boy wanted to use the "gems" he mined back in the summer for an arts and crafts project. His mom, who had just read the article double-checked her purse carefully before he started gluing. The *Times* reporter wrote that her son and she came forward, wearing the newly discovered diamond on her gold chain.

Conversely, the 2010 Diamond Dig \$600 diamond winner chose anonymity.

Not to be so mysterious, one of the other 2010 prize winners was a young boy who fair goers saw wearing his new safety helmet while he rode his freshly C&S refurbished bicycle up and down Main Street.

Twelve months afterwards, the Diamond was again found by a lucky prospector. The local newspaper coverage carried the C&S press release as an article. The C&S Pantry benefited from the fundraising profit of the 2011 Diamond Dig, which came in at \$347.

The Diamond Dig became another perennial activity whose long-time coordinator looked to 2011 as a year to transition to new event leadership. Vince Martin was eager to inform and train a new coordinator before the next year's East Lyme Day. Becky Westcott stepped forward to helm the Dig. She reported in August that the 2012 Dig diamond was found and that the event raised \$350.

One additional popular crowd-pleaser incorporated C&S. The East Lyme Auxiliary of Child and Family Services distributed sixty-seven free tickets to their May 2011 Touch-a-Truck event to C&S clients. Just as with businesses, several non-profits included Care & Share in their cooperative efforts to serve families in the area. These reciprocal relationships strengthened each organization over time, with the region's persons-and-families-in-need being served by the force multiplication of the joint efforts.

THE LIGHT PARADE

Each year, the summertime sunlit sparkling handful of gems from the Diamond Dig exploded some months later into the dazzling night lights of December's Niantic Light Parade.

Even if the skies were cloudy, and the stars of the evening were hard to perceive, there were lights festooning the lamp posts along the parade route and colorful floats ablaze and dazzling—as they made their way between the festive honor guard of streetlights, illuminating adults and children standing or sitting on space-reserving portable chairs set out earlier in the day.

Bundled in winter finery, people cheered, babies were rolled along in strollers or suspended in backpacks and belly-carriers. Involvement in the Light Parade was one of the best, most public, ways for business owners, churches, associations, and organizations to support and encourage social and civic engagement in the Town of East Lyme.

The official Care & Share scrap book bursts forth with articles and pictures of this notable and annually-anticipated, neighborhood and regional event. Each year as the twentieth century was marching to a close in the late nineties, Care & Share was raising funds to benefit their clients and assuring two to three dozen persistent auction winners a warm seat and a sumptuous multi-course meal behind the large store front window of Constantine's restaurant on Main Street, while they watched the festive parade floats go by.

By 2000, Care & Share stepped off even further and entered the parade with its own themed float celebrating *A Christmas Carol*. It was an ambitious float for a first effort, with cables and harnesses for a flying Ghost of Christmas Past. C&S won an award for second place in the category. The float involvement carried on for many years thereafter, celebrating East Lyme and seeking contributions and volunteer support simultaneously.

Some years later, as the Winter season crossed into the New Year of 2004, Care & Share benefited from another fundraiser organized and conducted by others. In January C&S was presented a donation for over \$400 by the Seymour brothers, Whitman, Chris, and Dave. Forty courageous souls took part in their 22nd New Year's swim, in the chilly waters off Black Point. The event began with the traditional Best Hat Contest, sponsored at Burke's Tavern, by Frank Burke who had taken the frigid plunge for many seasons with the brothers and friends.

A little more than eleven months later, 2004 closed out with another Constantine's dinner auction and a Light Parade Float for Care & Share. Through the decade the themes of the floats addressed Care & Share's growth, presence, and relationship with the community.

The Light Parade offered each year a highlight to fend off economic woes, including those sparked by the housing bubble and of the 2008 recession. Float themes for those years thanked neighbors for continuing to support

their neighbors in need. One year the sailboat float bore the request to help keep Care & Share afloat.

Care & Share was not the only East Lyme entity with roots in the community that was feeling the passing of years in the autumn and approaching winter of 2011. While Care & Share was barely an adult, at twenty-two years old, and growing within the natural boundaries of its mission, others were itching to get on with new things or return to their origins. One such person was the long-term owner of Pro-Tek on Main Street. Paul Cushing had a place in his heart for The Annual Light Parade, especially creating annual floats for the event. Including one very special float in front of his business.

Care & Share Treasurer Donna Butler and her husband Paul began discussing if, and how, Care & Share might assume responsibility for the Fill-A-Float sailboat that had resided, for several years by then, in front of Pro-Tek during the holiday season. The boat was a depository for food donations brought to Main Street on the night of the Parade and in the weeks before and after. Yuletide 2011 became the trial-and-training period for Care & Share, with a mutual mindset that from then on, it would be a Care & Share activity to fill the float. Once again, Care & Share was growing in response to a felt need and a call for assistance.

SALEM



Whereas events such as East Lyme Days and Light Parades attracted many individuals in and beyond East Lyme's Niantic and Flanders communities, probably Care & Share's most widespread engagement in the 2000s was of an entire community, the neighboring town of Salem.

The 2001 filing for Care & Share's status as a 501(c) (3) charitable organization, however, does not include mention of Salem.

A pair of historical oddities are worth noting. In 2004 Mae Hills did not mention Salem when she made a presentation to the East Lyme Board of Selectmen about a permanent home for the Pantry. But a Care & Share Press Release in late July of 2005 did. The march of time made any significance of these two appearances uncertain. It could well be that each was an exercise in "diplomacy."

But as an historical curiosity, at its 2008 November meeting the Board was reworking the C&S Mission Statement. The new wording included Salem, but refers to East Lyme and Niantic. For this website, the historians prefer to refer to Flanders, Niantic and Salem as communities served by Care & Share of East Lyme.

Despite these fluctuations in identification and inclusion, a major outreach to Salem and growth spurt for Care & Share had occurred by the second decade of the twenty-first century. The *Lyme Times* included a regular insert, *Our Town - Salem*, in copies being distributed to Salem residents. The late 2011 issue of *Our Town - Salem* tells an "origin story" of sorts.

The story of Kathy Lauzon typified what C&S past president and long-time advocate, Mae Hills, meant when she pointed out forcefully at a C&S historians' meeting a few weeks before she passed away in 2025. Mae said that Care & Share's growth was, and had always been, "organic." It grew from peoples' needs being served by others who wanted to, and saw a way to, help those needs to be filled. Such is the case with one story of how Care & Share of East Lyme began to serve similar needs in Salem, as it had in Flanders and Niantic.

The 2011 article, written by Elizabeth C. Regan, related the experience of C&S member Kathy Lauzon. New to Salem in 2006, Kathy gravitated to the C&S non-profit in 2009 as an outlet for her community-minded spirit and

proprietary attitude toward volunteerism and fundraising. In October 2009, Care & Share Board meeting minutes and emails address “the Salem question.” These reflect that thoughtful considerations were underscored with similar practicalities Kathy Lauzon echoed in the *Our Town* article two years later.

For Kathy, both volunteering and fundraising belonged within a community, without being depleted by organizational salaries and maintaining internal infrastructure. It was against this backdrop and with this mindset that Kathy began to work toward making C&S better known in Salem, both as a source for assistance and a recommended benefactor of Salem citizens’ generosity.

A small number of Salem residents had already been receiving assistance . . . [19 in 2009 cited by *Our Town*] . . . and donating to Care & Share, but not on a scale commensurate with what Kathy thought was appropriate. C&S President Jim Hall was attributed by *Our Town* as “estimating that between 10 and 15 percent of the 280 families served during his two years . . . [2010-2011] . . . as president have come from Salem.” He indicated that in 2011 financial support from Salem increased by approximately 25%. “It’s very heartening that while the need has grown, so has the generosity of the community, and we’ve been able to keep up with it.” An intra-board 2009 email opined how to increase Salem annual contributors and levels of contributions, still under 45 and \$800, respectively, at that time.

Instinctively, in much the same way that Care & Share began its first growth in the 1990s in East Lyme, Kathy Lauzon directed her attention to those who would know which children—and therefore families—were in greatest need of assistance. She communicated with school administrators, guidance counselors and school nurses.

Anecdotally, many Care & Share veterans claim that they were told the impetus for the inclusion of Salem and its residents in Care & Share activities—as volunteers and as recipients of assistance—grew from the presence of Salem youngsters as students in East Lyme High School. As most anecdotes, historians have to take them with a grain of salt unless verified by documentation. Alas, none seems to exist in C&S records.

Working with Steffie Hall from Care & Share, Kathy Lauzon energized summer camperships at Salem or nearby Norwich sites. She volunteered with

Care & Share to make food deliveries to Salem residences and to assist in coordinating the C&S pantry in East Lyme.

By the January 2012 annual meeting elections, she was nominated and elected to Board of Directors of Care & Share of East Lyme. The minutes announcing the appointment indicate her service to Care & Share and then, most essentially for her fellow townspeople, noted “ . . . [she] brings a Salem perspective to the organization.”

An October 14, 2014 on-line article forwarded by Jan Larson to historians chair Tracey Mirsky about the silver anniversary of Care & Share mentions C&S “expanded over the years to include the Town of Salem.” President Angie McLean’s introductory remarks delivered at the Anniversary welcomes, among others, “Salem volunteers and First Selectman Kevin Lynden,” and remarks that “we are now serving more Salem residents. Businesses and schools are supporting us more.”

It does not appear that prior to 2013 there was any formal proposal or vote taken to carry the mission of Care & Share to the citizens of Salem, nor to advocate for their voluntary involvement in the organization.

Notwithstanding the same, Care & Share has a tradition of Salem residents being active in Care & Share work and a presence in the town advocating and serving neighbors-in-need.