

Founders

In studying the course of the beginning of such a human enterprise as Care & Share of East Lyme, it is common to discover an immense expenditure of time and energy as this 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 over centuries of time, historians refer to 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. But not for those precise reasons.

Debbie Mandel's was the voice to ask the assembled 1989 Chamber of Commerce how it could help people-in-need in East Lyme. The Chamber did not run its flag up the proffered pole. It was Debbie's arms that passed around a sign-up sheet to solicit interested, soon-to-be-volunteers. Three other names appeared on the sheet below hers by meeting's end: Gail Lundin, Wendy Collins, and Connie Rue. As Wendy recently recalled, "The Chamber said no, so we did it."

It was Debbie's hand that, by mutual consent, recorded most of the early goings and doings of the foursome. Alas, a fire in her home in 2002 consigned all that real-time recording to dust. But the story on those pages did not curl up on gray, stiffening edges and land on the ash heap of history. The C&S story phoenixed from a distressed structure, as it would again and again over time.

That 1989 inaugural season of Care & Share abounded with seeking monetary and material 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, 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 . . . something of an oral history.

From conversations with the Founders . . .

As January 1989 dawned Gail Lundin, Connie Rue, Wendy Collins, 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 and her husband ran The Little Professor Book Center on Penn Ave. Wendy was an advertising executive selling ValPak mailings ad space to businesses. Debbie was the owner and 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.

Gail said that it was after the Chamber meeting that 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 from the restaurant menu 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 Loft. 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 constable 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 few years, the food and baskets were mostly picked up at the Pantry. However, some were delivered to recipients' homes by the founders and their husbands, if the families did not drive or have a car. The Sail Loft was used as a collection and organizational point, with clients arriving on the designated day.

Debbie shared recollections of long tables in the Sail Loft piled so high with food and gift donations for them to organize. The other founders recalled in their own various ways, those long tables and the generous space the Sail Loft offered. Their descriptions were vibrant. Boxes and boxes of donated non-perishable food. They explained that there was more than the turkey-and-fixings dinner for each family who came to the Loft. The Lions were faithfully consistent, arriving for distribution day with vehicles of foodstuffs. They brought along turkeys that Care & Share volunteers and Lions members had been keeping in their home freezers, or had picked up at donating local businesses. Because the response from the community was so magnanimous, each family usually also received, recalled Debbie "three or four more large boxes" of food to bring home to last after that one holiday meal. As did the families who received deliveries instead.

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."

Those formative years were no free-for-all however, by any means. Debbie explained that, while no one was turned away, there was a thorough and privacy-respecting vetting process for clients to process. C&S distributed prospective client sign-up sheets to schools, the VNA, Town Hall, and social service agencies. These "intake" forms required family information, demographics, and inquired about the specifics about what type of assistance

was needed. She pointed out that families' religious observances were noted and holiday baskets, etc. were distributed for Chanukah on a different day than the Christmas distribution, depending on the given year's calendar.

In the early years, Care & Share looked to identify volunteers who would adopt an entire family for the holidays—for food and for gifts. To preserve privacy, Care & Share still was the agency for delivery to these adoptees. Debbie celebrated Paul Formica whose family seemed always to volunteer to adopt a family. She said he always asked to adopt a family who had children whose ages approximated the Formica family youngsters. An early and ardent C&S supporter and cheerleader, Mr. Formica recognized right from the start that C&S offered East Lyme's children an in-person recognition of what it meant to be helping those in need, especially the unrecognized less fortunate than themselves, living and going to school with them elbow-to-elbow.

Anecdotally, Debbie told of an occasion one Christmas of such childhood awe at a Care & Share delivery. Debbie and her husband were carrying in the extra boxes of food. Someone had donated fresh fruit—which was an oddity—and a hand of bananas was set atop one of the miscellaneous food delivery box. A young boy of the family spied the bananas and cried out, "Mama look . . . bananas!" His amazement startled the Care & Share visitors. "Imagine," Debbie invited her C&S interviewer, "amid all the gifts and turkey and fixings, to be so excited about how special a banana could be!"

Gail and Debbie both recalled Liberty Bank was, early-on, a major contributor to the December holiday experience. The bank placed a lobby tree associated with C&S-provided wish lists. Banking customers used the lists as references to buy and donate holiday wrapped gifts for children and adults. The bank patrons returned the gifts to the bank, which were then gathered by C&S and brought to the Loft. Debbie said people just loved buying toys for kids. A few founders cited last minute shopping scrambles to fill in the gaps—based on the application forms and wish lists—for gifts not provided by donation. Even back then teens and senior citizens were tough to buy for. She recalled trips to Mitchell's Market and multiple shopping carts filled to the brims.

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. The founders fashioned decorated homemade donation cans and asked businesses to place them on counters in their stores to collect coins, to support the effort explained on accompanying fliers.

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. More than one founder related the story. In her telling of it, Debbie told the historians to emphasize that the day presented frigid winds and freezing temperatures. The woman was not wearing a coat. While the presents were being wrapped, Connie went home and got the woman a coat to wear. The episode deeply touched the woman and the founders themselves. Debbie said that over the next few days they went through their closets, brought coats from home, and hung them in the Loft to be ready for those who needed them. Wendy said, “that’s when we started asking for coats as well as food to be donated.”

The event and woman were truly memorable. Two years later, that same mom returned, having gotten her family back on its 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. The four women wanted to be orderly and purposeful, as they were in their professional business lives. They knew they needed a Board of Directors format to the organization. They acquired a copy of *Robert's Rules of Orders* and ran their formal gatherings accordingly. Debbie Mandel was selected as President, Care & Share's first. She reflected many years later about how remarkable the experience was at the outset, and how that carried forward. “We didn't know each other before. There was never a moment of friction.”

After a slight reflective pause, she opined, “If you believe in karma . . .” And she left it at that.

The Four Founders 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 and Debbie had explained that the Founders never asked why there was a need expressed. Gail 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.” Debbie chimed in saying that as far as they were concerned, if someone asked them for help, they needed it. Then she laughed to remember that on two occasions the coin cans the stores put out for them disappeared. “Oh well,” she said, “I guess they needed the money.”

Care & Share received monetary donations as well as goods and foodstuffs. After a full season there was a little money left on hand. Debbie related the story of this first time it happened. The four women all gravitated to an idea. They had heard from C&S clients that almost all the social services offices needed were over in New London. So, they unanimously agreed, without lengthy discussion nor alternative ideas, to spend the \$50 on multiple round

trip bus fare tickets to New London and gave them away to facilitate client access to those social services.

A further idea surfaced that helping families out would “give mom a break,” especially in summertime without school lunches and class time. And so were born the first funding of summer camp from Care & Share—dubbed affectionally as “camperships,” to Parks & Recs programs held at town schools. But client accountability was still part of the appreciation for a need that was valued. From the “intake” application forms, needs were assessed and verified. Camperships were pretty forthright. But Debbie emphasized that to be considered for the college scholarships students had to demonstrate they were serious about going to school. They had to go through a written application process with Care & Share.

Even at the beginning, Care & Share tended to the 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 told Care & Share to give their apportionment of food to someone else who needed it instead.

The accuracies in 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 to the very details. That happened in separate phone calls with the Founders—vanquishing uncertainty and elevating the importance of one particular event.

Such an instance as this 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 people who 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 seeming disparity arrived at their door. One of the founders said they learned in those early years that "everyone has a different story."

Institutionally, Gail cited that her husband's church community came forward to assist the seniors at holidays while Care & Share attended to children and families. Debbie indicated that Care & Share provided support and assistance to many senior citizens.

After many years or so of the first C&S decade, vacant spaces for a seasonal collection depot or pantry seemed to be made generously available temporarily. From these, Care & Share continued to receive recipients and make holiday deliveries, as space and client needs allowed. 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. Mitchell'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."

Debbie added that after the Lions food drives at East Lyme High School at Christmas there was so much food stacked high and wide on the long tables in the Sail Loft. It was the six of us (more on number 5 and 6 in a moment) filling the extra boxes of food to be given out, too. She finished that reflection saying, "It was such a wonderful feeling." She noted how it contradicted the general attitude the Founders faced in the beginning years, "We are a wealthy community—no one needs help here." She offered for evidence to the contrary, "When I left after 10 years, we were up to 100 families each season."

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 a momentary 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. Debbie Mandel also affirmed "Paul Formica did so much for Care & Share." Replying to Jan, he wrote in one message:

I was president of the EL Chamber of Commerce back in the early 90s serving with some wonderful board members. Four ladies became a strong and closely-knit group. Connie, Wendy, Gail, and Debbie became known as Care & Share!

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 newly founded 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 in the 1990s and 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 . . .

There is an interwoven story of Care & Share that is also essential to tell. That is the story about participating in an altruistic adventure that frees your better angels to fly and carry you along with them. It's a chronicle of how that flight places you in the graced formation of others on the same migration of goodness and sheds its blessings on those you love and live with, your family.

C&S Founder Connie Rue's 2026 note to the historians for this website reflected on this:

We were four strangers who came together as businesswomen and put our hearts and minds together to serve a segment of the community that nobody in East Lyme wanted to admit existed. I believe that God played a

large part in bringing us together. Usually, Moms get together because they share children in the same school, sport, or church, but we had none of those in common. And our businesses didn't really cross paths – other than buying advertising from Wendy.

My husband, Bob Rue and I moved from Illinois to Niantic, CT to open a bookstore. We owned and operated the Little Professor Book Center for five years (1988-1993) which gave me a foothold in downtown Niantic. I was new to town and working with the Chamber of Commerce and Niantic Downtown Merchants filled my search for new “colleagues” and friends.

Gail, Debbie, and Wendy were old-time locals and welcomed me into their fold. We truly enjoyed each other's company, brought varied ideas to the team effort, and above all, respected our roles as friends and do-gooders in our joint mission to enrich the lives of at-risk children, families, and individuals.

All of this made our joint efforts to create “Care & Share of East Lyme” to improve our community that much more remarkable.

One especially rewarding feature of working with C&S folks and its recipients, was the opportunity to deliver food to their homes at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We met many local families who were in such dire straits. Unfortunately, the numbers grew year by year. From 1990 through 2016 or so, my family delivered meals including turkeys, trimmings, desserts, and milk. I mention “milk” because my grandson Leo, starting at age 3, was in charge of carrying the milk jug to the family's door. He was proud to help and learned early on about helping others in a very meaningful way. He witnessed very poor living conditions including people living out of motel rooms. One family in the motel setting had 5 children!

When Leo turned 5 and got the chance to work at the C&S “toy store”, he would walk a parent around the shelves to help them choose a gift for their child. Of course, Leo was the expert with boy toys! I am sure these young experiences have followed his heart through the years. There are so many stories to tell.

And for all of this, I am very grateful, especially to the folks who started this worthy organization and those who have carried the torch.

Just as Connie Rue and Paul Formica, Debbie Mandel told a story involving her son and the Care & Share mission. As the others did, she also had her children, including her son Ben, help pick out Care & Share gifts for kids at Christmas. She thought it would be a good life lesson and was affirmed in that belief later in her son's life. After a successful career in a high-powered business environment, Ben retired a few years ago. He had offers to do other things, related to that work, but declined. Ben started volunteering at a food bank right after he left that NY job. When the Director's job opened, Ben considered it, but decided he preferred being a volunteer.

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 more it could have become with their direct contributions.

During the historian and founders phone conversations in 2025-26 for this history, Wendy 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 three after that first holiday season. She credited them with following through, “They took Care & Share to the world.”

Betty Purvis

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

President Norm Bender conveyed how amazing it was that almost everything for many years seemed to run through Betty’s garage. He spoke of her initiative and how quite independently she looked after the needs of Care & Share’s clients without waiting to be asked or getting authorization. He opined that she would have kept going at it for as long as she could, even if Care & Share fell on hard times and couldn’t continue.

Another quintessential Care & Share active member, past Secretary 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

Mae Hills

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 Hills. 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, businesspeople—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 presidential 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."

One of the Founders recalled Mae dearly several months after Mae passed. Debbie Mandel reminisced that in those first years of Care & Share, when the founders were trying to get things done, she referred to Mae as our "Angel." Care & Share could not afford a phone line of its own at first. So, Debbie would use her Chrysalis phone line to take Care & Share calls—with caller directions to split Care & Share answering machine messages away separately. Once Care & Share got going and people were increasingly turning to C&S for help, she was inundated with inquiries, with callers asking, "can you help me?" Debbie said that Mae Hills could answer any question she could ask. She knew people. She knew how to find things. All they had to do was call Mae on her phone and Mae Hills got things done or showed them how to do so. For the longest time all their communications were by phone.

It was many years later, after Mae retired from school nursing and started showing up regularly to help the Founders, that Debbie finally met Mae in person. She said the very first time "I was meeting my hero." She described Mae as knowledgeable, helpful, kind, and generous. Expounding on her earlier comment, she described her first face-to-face meeting Mae this way: "I felt like I was meeting royalty."

Years later into that century . . .

Founder Debbie Mandel reflected on a decade of holiday hyperactivity. She said it was very hard to describe just how big an event Care & Share Christmas was each year. By that tenth year there were 100 families coming to the Sail Loft for a holiday meal basket, three or four large cartons of extra food, and gifts. Haltingly she described the long tables, the floor to ceiling boxes of food and gifts and clothing. It was more than just the crush and press of the actual distribution day, but the weeks of anticipation and preparation beforehand. Finally, after ten years, she said it just hit her, the realization that it was time for her to be done.

She came to understand that Care & Share was so much more than anyone could have expected in 1989, when 8 families were fed and cared for at Thanksgiving and 18 that first Christmas. “It was time for new people to come in and take it to the next level. And they did.” She was proud of their accomplishments, characterizing Care & Share at the turn of the century as a well-oiled machine, with camperships and scholarships and emergency assistance in place.

She identified Care & Share as a “feel-good experience.” It was that for hundreds of clients who knew and were appreciative that Care & Share made them feel seen and felt and taken care of—something so important because the social services system was so hard. And it was a feel-good experience for those who cared to volunteer to make it so.

Debbie pointed out how important it was for the longevity of Care & Share and the sustenance of its clients that the next leaders applied themselves to a task the founders discovered to be beyond their means and abilities to achieve while they were building the organization’s first foundation. She said “to become an official, recognized non-profit was one of the best things Care & Share did” in those following years. She also attributed Salem’s benefiting from and supporting Care & Share as a crucial step in C&S’s development.

In a closing comment in one email, Debbie wrote: “And I am sorry that we didn’t have enough forethought to preserve more from those early years. Who could have imagined the powerful force that Care & Share would become.”

Founder Wendy Collins told the historians of her moving away from East Lyme to New York State in 2001, then to Florida in 2004, and eventually settling in Texas in 2023 to be near one of her sons.

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 with Care & Share through friends and her family’s church newsletter in

Wendy 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.