

Connie Mercer

It's 10 o'clock, and She Knows Where the Children Are

As the director of The Exchange Club of Princeton, Connie Mercer oversees the effort to find shelter, and hope, for families with no place to go.

CONNIE Mercer, the director of the Exchange Club of Greater Princeton, has seen it all. She has witnessed the heartbreak of families at the end of their luck: life at welfare motels along Route 1; the happiness that a new pair of sneakers can bring a poor kid; and the thrill of a family who manages to move into its own apartment fully furnished, thanks to her organization.

There is much that crosses her transom that frightens or saddens her. But she remains hopeful, even philosophical, about how people can, and are, reaching out to help those among us who are less fortunate. A tall, formidable person with a soft voice and a ready smile, Mercer finds the time to run a staff of 1,000 volunteers. She also addresses

the individual needs of people she cares about in ways that are largely undocumented.

She founded the Exchange Club in 1990, but refuses to take credit for its success. "I provided the environment," she says modestly. Her energy and enthusiasm set the tone for the Exchange Club. The core staff of volunteers and AmeriCorp people, plus her mother, really do the work. And work they do. They all put in 50- or 60-hour weeks in return for a yearly salary of \$7,000. True to her democratic ideals, Mercer lets members of her staff be their own bosses in order to dream up programs that channel other people's care, know-how and energy into something useful. "This is a community that

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Connie Mercer, of the Exchange Club of Greater Princeton.

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wants to help, and it has the resources, and it wants to make a difference."

The mission of the Exchange Club is to help homeless families. The target population is the people who are sheltered in the Route 1 motels. "We don't want any kids we care about sleeping on floors," says Mercer. The original aim was to provide food — which they do, to the tune of 40,000 meals provided last year. Now, the organization offers a range of programs, not the least of it tutoring, driving people to look for apartments, and ferrying kids to amusement parks.

Volunteers — they might be former beneficiaries of the Exchange Club's programs or Princeton ladies whose husbands run big companies — also collect donated furniture and distribute it. And they provide clothing so that the children all have winter clothes and the right kind of shoes. And the search for corporate sponsors is a part of the effort, too. It helps when the Princeton restaurant Totally Wired donates 300 sandwiches or when a pediatrician examines all the children for free.

Connie Mercer is a trained clinical psychologist. But she also relies on her own family experience to guide her work. In normal situations, young people often start life with a boost from the family. Welfare families, on the other hand, are going it alone. So the Exchange Club wants to be there to serve as the surrogate family.

"One of the key problems with these families," she says, "is that many men are incapable of being supportive, even if they want to be. But the folk's families are also incapable usually because they have no resources."

With so much woe to contend with, how does she continue to find volunteers — especially in this day when everybody complains about being too busy? "We probably get as much thanks from our volunteers who are so grateful to have a place to give," says Mercer. "It is just delightful to see our volunteers and our recipients working together on a project, sitting next to each other, sharing ways of making things happen, and talking about their kids."

This gets to the core of what Mercer believes, and what, by extension, the Exchange Club believes. She wants the community to get to know the children and their families, and to understand their plight. So, having a large staff of paid professionals, if it were an option, would be beside the point. "Once people see the kids and the squalor of their lives, and they realize that they have the resources and can fix things, then people want to help," she says firmly. "That's the glory of the Exchange Club." ●

— Deborah A. Kaple