



LWS alum Bill McClain with kids involved in the GIDE Youth Academy.

J. SINCLAIR PHOTO

A CHRISTMAS COLLABORATION

How a LWS project continues to make the holidays brighter for families in need.

Bill McClain was director of youth services for the Housing Authority of Winston-Salem when his Leadership Winston-Salem classmates decided they wanted to do something special together for Christmas. He connected them to hardworking families who were struggling. The first year, the class delivered Christmas dinner to three families.

"The communities I work in have high-poverty levels and are underserved, so some of the families are in dire need," McClain says. "We try to select [families] where we know the kids would not have any other opportunities."

LWS class members met with the families several times during that first year and helped them with issues they were facing, such as transportation and job referrals. One of those class members was Don Martin, former superintendent of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools and current Forsyth County commissioner.

"Essentially, Bill McClain identified families that were trying to pull themselves up by their bootstraps—going to school, working two jobs—and who had lots of children," Martin recalls. "You can tell from the sincere appreciation how thankful these

families are for some support to help their large families have a better Christmas. I firmly believe that when folks are trying, small tokens of support demonstrate that people care about them, and it motivates them to work even harder."

The Leadership Winston-Salem members didn't stop their support when the class ended, however. Instead, they began bonding together each Christmas and purchasing Walmart gift cards for other families that McClain identified. It's a tradition that continues today, nearly two decades since the class adjourned.

Martin says McClain always tells the mothers to buy something for themselves first. "We discovered that many of these mothers do for their children all year long; they sacrifice for them in many, many ways," McClain says. "Our suggestion for them is that they get something for themselves first, simply because that may be their only opportunity to do so."

McClain is now program director for the Guiding Institute for Developmental Education (GIDE) Youth Education Academy, which provides afterschool programs for K-12 children at four sites, including Cleveland Avenue Homes,

Piedmont Park Apartments, Rolling Hills Apartments, and Townview Apartments. He and Martin agree that the LWS experience was hugely beneficial for them both.

"When I attended Leadership Winston-Salem, I had only been in town for one year," Martin says, "so I didn't know a lot of people. The Leadership Winston-Salem experience was great exposure to the community, and I met some wonderful leaders. ...The friendships formed have remained strong."

McClain says LWS taught him the importance of collaboration.

"It allowed me to get to know a lot of my community partners that I work with now," he says. "Many of them I've worked with since 1996, and we have embarked upon several collaborative efforts that have affected people who live in underserved communities."

—KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

This article is the seventh in a yearlong series on Leadership Winston-Salem as the program celebrates its 30th anniversary. For more info on LWS, go to leadershipwsm.org.