

## UCM marks 35 years of lending a hand

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**By Beth Lawrence**

United Christian Ministries is celebrating 35 years of filling in the gaps to help residents make ends meet.

Director Ann Selby believes UCM is a symbol of hope and a place where miracles happen.

“I have seen families who were on the brink of homelessness receive the support they needed to stay in their homes,” she said. “I have seen individuals struggling with mental health issues find the help and resources they needed to start on a path towards healing. These moments have been truly inspiring and have reinforced my belief in the power of community and compassion.”

Volunteers Elaine White and Gayle Woody say they have been blessed by volunteering there.

“You get to know that everybody doesn’t live like we live,” said White who has volunteered since September 1989. “It’s a whole different world. We don’t know it’s here unless we’re looking for it.” Like other charitable groups, UCM was born of need.

In 1988 representatives of First Baptist Church and First United Methodist Church began to discuss the need to work together to help those who were left out due to limitations on the types of help other agencies could provide. In December that year, 16 Jackson County churches formed an advisory council.

In January 1989 UCM was incorporated. On June 4, 1989 a consecration service was held for the group’s first location, a house on Asheville Highway.

The original house consisted of two rooms for counseling, a large waiting area, a kitchen where some food was stored and distributed and an out building for storing some nonperishable items, White recalls.

By 1996 the ministry had outgrown its first home and moved to its current location at 191 Skyland Drive. The second location was expanded in 2011 and 2021.

UCM helps clients with emergency rent, housing – particularly code purple nights – utilities such as water, electricity and heating; some medical co-pays and other expenses at the agency’s discretion. They also provide food bags to those in need. Unlike some food pantries, UCM stocks household and hygiene items such as paper towels, toothpaste and shampoo.

“We do diapers,” White said. “There are a lot of needs out there. If you have a young child and you’re on a fixed income, that’s a big (help).”

### **Need growing**

In the first year the organization helped fewer than 400 clients. By 2023 that number had grown to 4,000.

In 2021 UCM distributed 21,703 food bags.

Not only has the need grown but the faces and circumstances of clients have changed.

When Woody began volunteering in 2017, she largely saw older residents struggling along on fixed incomes.

“Now, we’re still seeing those senior citizens, but we’re also seeing young working families,” she said. “It’s the working poor. Their salary doesn’t automatically go up when gas goes up. If we can give them food, then they can use their resources for paying their power bill, buying gas.”

White believes that the need has changed as well and more working poor are finding their way to UCM for help than in the early days.

“Things are a little bit better with income now, but it still doesn’t pay for everything that you have to have,” she said.

The assistance UCM provides is funded through grants, individual donations and donations of money and food from local churches and other groups. They receive donated goods of food and other items from Walmart, Food Lion and local farms. They additionally purchase food and items from MANNA food bank and other local suppliers. The nonprofit reserves carts in Food Lion and Harold’s IGA to make it easier for shoppers to donate.

In the early days all donations came from local churches or were purchased by UCM when the A&P across the street had a sale, White said.

Church and public support is crucial.

“The more people who contribute, the more support you have to be sustainable,” Woody said. “That’s why we’ve been able to be there 35 years. If we didn’t have these churches and individuals, that ongoing support, there’s no way it could run.”

Woody called UCM and similar nonprofits “frontline organizations” that are there to help the community.

“These are longtime residents who have served our community well,” she said. “I see so many of these retired people; some of them I knew for years. Also, some of these young families are my former students.”

One mechanism that helps keep an organization going for decades is its volunteers.

Volunteers make it possible for UCM to open five days a week.

“We could always use more volunteers.” White said. “If you didn’t have volunteers, you couldn’t run something like this. It’s so important.”

It doesn’t matter what your skill set or preference is, she said, there is always a way for someone to help.

To learn more, donate or volunteer, call 586-8228 or visit [ucmsylva.org](http://ucmsylva.org).