

Entrepreneur is 'on our side'

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During this season of generosity, many are thankful to various individuals.

But Forsyth County's nonprofit community is especially thankful to one man, who for some 15 years has been doing more than his fair share to support organizations that help those in need.

Bill Norman, owner of Norman's Landing restaurant on Peachtree Parkway, recently surpassed the \$1 million mark in giving to area charities.

And the mark wasn't reached through large, multi-county fundraisers or corporate matches. Norman's accomplished it through a variety of small events at his eatery and the immediate area.

From twice-a-year ping pong tournaments to annual spaghetti dinners, Norman's gifts, often relatively small, have just added up over the years.

Ruth Goode, executive director of the United Way of Forsyth County, has worked with Norman for as long as he's been giving.

She said a golf tournament for the United Way about 15 years ago was one of his first fundraisers.

"It was a huge success," she said of that first tournament, which has become an annual staple. "I think back in the early days it was easier to get people to give than it has been in recent years."

During the economic ups and downs of the past decade and a half, Norman's philanthropy has remained consistent.

And that's somewhat unusual, particularly for a small business owner, said James McCoy, presi-

dent and chief executive officer of the Cumming-Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce.

"I'm not aware of any other small business person who has reached that [\$1 million] mark," he said. "Not to say there's not a lot of small business owners who have made an impact, but you just don't see that level often."

"[Bill's] clearly had a long-term view of giving. He's setting the bar for a lot of other small businesses."

Tradition begins

Norman said that view began before he opened Norman's Landing in 1995.

He had spent his entire career prior to that in the restaurant business, beginning at age 14 at the Marriott.

Later, the Buckhead native became chief operations officer of the then-new Longhorn Steaks concept. He went on to help the chain open 52 restaurants in his 11 years with the company.

After leaving in 1994, Norman said he knew he wanted to "open a restaurant just for charity."

He said the eatery's tradition of giving to the community began "on opening night."

"We did a \$5 a plate deal for Family Haven [domestic violence shelter] and raised \$3,500 for them," Norman said.

From the start, the restaurant included a "ping pong room," where guests could play some table tennis and drop money into a jar for a different "charity of the month."

In 1996, Norman expanded the concept to include a twice-per-year tournament, which raised even more money for a selected cause.

He also held an annual spaghetti dinner for



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Bill Norman talks about his experience with raising money for charities through Norman's Landing.

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Over the years, that event brought in nearly \$130,000.

Norman also honors emergency service personnel every day by offering them 50 percent off on their meals.

Linda Lang is a board member of Literacy Forsyth, a nonprofit that works with Lanier Technical College to help adults learn to read, get their GEDs and study English. The organization was the recent beneficiary of ping pong play.

"[The tournament raised] \$1,400 for us and that's great in our world," Lang said.

"Bill's always such a supporter of the community and I love that he doesn't discriminate. He could give to a United Way nonprofit or something you haven't even heard of before. Whenever there's a need to be met, Bill's willing to help out."

Early inspiration

Norman's willingness to help pre-dates his restaurant career. He said he's always wanted to give back to his community, even as a child.

"I'd give my lunch money to other people if they needed it or I'd do stuff around the neighborhood," he said.

Some of that generous spirit came from his mother, who he said also inspired his career in the restaurant business.

"My mom was a home economics teacher," he said. "She taught me to cook for my brother and father, so I ended up doing a lot of the cooking growing up."

He said his mother, who passed away two years ago on Thanksgiving day, also taught him how to delegate through assigning household chores to him, his brother and father.

She also inspired his outgoing personality.

"She could talk to anybody," he said. "I guess that's why I'm like that. I can talk to anybody, even at the gas station or anywhere."

Norman said his mother also took time out to cook for church events, ran sports concession stands and led various activities to "help out" in the neighborhood.

"She was a gentle and giving person, a delightful person," said Goode, who recalled how even in her later life Norman's mother helped with his

community efforts.

"She would come out to a lot of the events. She came to some of our golf tournaments."

Future of giving

Like most small businesses, Norman's Landing has felt the economic downturn in recent years.

Norman said the ping pong contribution jar "has dried up" and other events haven't seen the profits of years past.

"The United Way golf tournaments have made close to \$28,000 some years, but we only made \$16,000 last year," he said.

But as long his restaurant stays open, Norman plans to continue the tradition of giving.

"He's said that he could really use the ping pong room for extra seating in the restaurant," Goode said. "But he feels it's important to keep that room to raise money for the community."

Goode said his contributions to United Way alone have had a huge impact on the county.

He's consistently been one of the top givers in the agency's annual campaign, raising close to \$400,000 over the past 15 years.

"That's Bill, he's always felt the need to give back," she said. "He's been by our side for the last 15 years."

And he'll stay at the side of Forsyth's nonprofit community for as long as possible, he said.

"Our goal was to get to \$1 million," he said. "If the economy turns loose, we'll try to make it to \$2 million."

"I couldn't be prouder of my employees and management that they know what I've always believed — if you support the community, the community will support you."