

United Way's Hope Award winner: From homeless to helping others

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(Photo: Jessica Phelps/The Advocate)

GRANVILLE – The United Way of Licking County, and its award winners, celebrated reaching some lofty goals, but vowed not to rest on those achievements, at Thursday's annual meeting and recognition breakfast at Denison University.

Christopher Wills, winner of the Hope Award, struggled with addiction and homelessness two years ago, but has turned his life around to become a dedicated father, student, employee and volunteer at St. Vincent Haven, Newark Think Tank on Poverty and the Licking County Re-Entry Coalition.

"On each point in my life, I didn't realize how many people cared, and now I have this family (of supporters)," Wills said.

Now, he wants others to know: "There is hope. There are voices out there fighting for them."

In other news: [Kirkersville looking to increase hours for police chief with checkered past \(/story/news/local/2018/05/03/kirkersville-looking-increase-hours-police-chief/576155002/\)](/story/news/local/2018/05/03/kirkersville-looking-increase-hours-police-chief/576155002/)

In other news: [Autism program hopes to expand with move to downtown Newark \(/story/news/local/2018/05/03/autism-program-hopes-expand-move-downtown-newark/552223002/\)](/story/news/local/2018/05/03/autism-program-hopes-expand-move-downtown-newark/552223002/)

Donna Gibson, director of operations at St. Vincent Haven, said she met Wills when she was working with Mental Health America of Licking County.

"He was homeless and I knew of the Haven, and I knew they could help him," Gibson said. "He was fighting to be able to see his son. He went to court without an attorney and stated his case and was able to see his son. It was a domino effect of resources from the shelter to transitional housing."

John Paul Munhall, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul Housing Facilities, said the focus should be on Wills, who is a Denison University student majoring in business.

"Chris is his own success story," Munhall said. "We're blessed to be able to be involved in his life."

The United Way of Licking County will help fund 50 programs for 2018-19 to help people in situations like Wills.

The 2017-18 United Way campaign ended with the unveiling of the total donations received since July 1, 2017. Campaign chairwoman Joan Franks announced the total of \$1,762,648, surpassing the goal of \$1.75 million.

United Way will distribute \$1.1 million in grants to 50 programs that focus on behavioral health, children, youth, families and poverty, and another \$35,247 to other health and human services.

"Every dollar counts," Franks said. "I think something was confirmed for me, and that's total team effort. It takes everybody in this community's support. It's very much a team environment. To join together, it's the only way to make it happen."

Franks said the potential in Licking County is even greater. She said 88,000 Licking Countians have jobs, and if each gave \$1 a week for 52 weeks, the amount raised would be \$4.4 million.

Deb Dingus, executive director of the United Way of Licking County, looking ahead to next year's campaign, led the audience of 300 in a chant of "What can I do next?"

"It's a good question," Dingus said. "We're not done until we're all done. We've done some good things, but we're not done yet. There's a lot to do."

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United Way awards

Hope Award: Christopher Wills, volunteer at St. Vincent de Paul Housing Facilities.

Ken Johnston Volunteer Award: Randy Williams, volunteer at Canal Market District.

Affinity Award: Women United.

Live United Awards: Anomatic Corporation, Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities, Licking County Human Resources Department.

Outstanding Employee Campaign Coordinator: Steve Noth, Anomatic Corporation.

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