Kanawha County – KVSS – Elkview Showcase

Elk River Community & Education Center

August, 2016

A life of dedication

On almost any week day, the community of Elkview is busy doing, well community things. Everything from tending a garden, to getting ready to purchase groceries or maybe enjoying some time by the Elk River on a pleasant summer day. All that changed, however, for the residents of this close-knit community when storms rolled in and the water rose to a threatening level no one could have imagined.

Thursday and Friday, June 23 and 24, will be long remembered not only for the amount of rain, but how quickly it came down and raised water levels in creeks, rivers, and lakes. Kanawha was among several counties identified in early reporting as being hardest hit with many other areas having significant localized damage. As water levels began to recede and the statewide assessments began, the community of Elkview awoke Saturday morning and saw there was lots of work ahead of them.

To look at the Elk River Community and Education Center now, it's hard to believe that water, mud, and other debris was almost four feet deep inside the building. However, as bad as it looked and despite how unsettling it felt, it did not deter Karen Edwards from getting right to work. The center is home to the "Senior's Lunch Program" of Kanawha Valley Senior Services. For the last five-plus years, Karen has continually prepared and served the seniors of Elkview and beyond. A consistent theme quoted by everyone who has experienced her warm embrace, ever present smile and delicious food is: "She is the reason we love coming here. Her love and devotion is what makes the center what it is today."

Edwards drove up to Elkview from her home in Charleston that Saturday not knowing what to expect. She didn't know or even think about if she would have been paid to cover her time that weekend. As she tells it, "All I could think about was that people still needed to have a meal and I couldn't let my seniors go without." When she was finally allowed in the building, she just couldn't believe it. Her heart sank the most when looking over the kitchen and discovering that the motors and electrical wiring for her all commercial appliances were completely destroyed. "I didn't have any idea what it would take to get back to any sense of normal, but I knew I had to find a way." And the community rallied behind her. The Pinch Volunteer Fire Department came and power washed the mud and dirt off the walls and floors. Next, a Charleston floor and carpet cleaning business offered to refresh and clean up all the floors and carpet...for free. In the days following, local church members and small groups from the local Day Report

Center came to the center to wash, clean and do whatever Edwards needed them to do. In addition, the center received funds from the Kanawha County Commission to help with equipment replacement and repairs. “From that Saturday on, we were very blessed and everyone who came to help was energized to get us back up and running,” she said.

While all this work was in motion, Edwards did not drop the ball when it came to feeding her community. As part of Kanawha Valley Senior Services, Edwards knew she could turn to her colleagues for help, which is what she did. She was able to get 25 meals prepared and sent to her each day, and she offered them to local seniors and to anyone who was in need.

Many of the senior center members including Buffy Thompson, Wilma Morton, Jack Patton, and Gary and Violet Estep also came to do what they could. They all point to Edwards as the reason why the center received so much help. An endless stream of positive words like blessed, faithful, beautiful, and fabulous are used to describe how they feel about Edwards.

There are many dimensions to Karen Edwards. She is a wife, mother, grandmother, friend and the backbone to more than one family in her Charleston community. Edwards in fact began to develop her sense of public service as a youngster. “I am the way I am because of my mother,” says Edwards. “She had a giving heart, a positive attitude and believed that through faith all things were possible. I spent lots of time with her in my early years when she worked for Putnam Aging.” As she matured into a young adult she was asked if she would like to work there. Edwards’ response was an enthusiastic yes! She began as the Title V Director with Putnam. “It just seemed so natural to me that I took on the devotion and passion for service my mother exhibited. I love what I do.”

Edwards’ dedication especially during this difficult time was recently recognized by the State of West Virginia with a certificate of recognition for her 26 years of public service. Her certificate is written in part that she “has been role model and mentor to many, and has led by example in her tireless pursuit of treating others with respect and creating a positive work environment, while achieving the best possible outcomes and solutions for the seniors of the Elk River City Community Center.” “She is so much more than what her job description might say,” said Buffy Thompson. “She is truly the heart of this center and we can’t imagine life before she came here in 2011. We are so deeply appreciative.”

There are many senior center staffers who faithfully serve the needs of seniors across the state. We applaud Karen Edwards’ recognition and are grateful for her continued service and focus on “her” West Virginia seniors. Congratulations!

Sit Long - Talk Much - Laugh Often