



LOCAL HEROES

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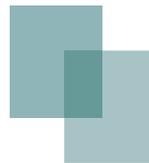
LOCAL HEROES

Nurses on the front lines in hospitals ... aides caring for isolated seniors ... the mask makers ... the food pantry workers and school meal packers ... the police and first responders putting their lives on the line in emergency response.

These are the tireless workers – the unsung heroes – who are guiding us through this new territory of a pandemic and beyond.

Every community has them, from the kindly health care worker who finds a way to cheer nursing home residents with hallway singalongs to the restaurant owner, struggling to keep his business afloat but still donating meals to hospital workers.

We invited our readers to nominate local heroes who inspired them and warmed their hearts. These are their stories.



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Oden, Orion's canine friend, is a non-judgmental listener as Alana reads. Her fluency and accuracy in reading improved each time Oden came to visit.



Orion Communities of Phoenixville is used to helping people, but the pandemic created a whole new level of needed assistance to those whose income disappeared with businesses closing. Rent assistance and food were the top priorities, and Orion had to get creative with finding a way to help.

ORION COMMUNITIES

By Jen Samuel
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PHOENIXVILLE — The people of Orion Communities are heroes every day to many in the Phoenixville area community, but following the declaration of a national emergency on March 13, they did even more to uplift lives of those in need.

Located at 237 Bridge St., in downtown Phoenixville, the 43-year-old nonprofit was nominated as an organization representing Heroes of the Pandemic.

Orion supported 100 families with aid to deal

with financial obstacles as a result of the novel coronavirus crisis. During the last three months, the nonprofit has helped more than 300 people in poverty with rent, resources, emergency expenses, and words of encouragement.

“We feel so blessed,” said Kris Keller, executive director. “We are grateful for the recognition of Orion and our mission being recognized as a community hero. Our hope with this increased visibility is that we will have more resources to help stabilize more families as part of the COVID-19 Response.”

Orion has also been busy during the last 90 days providing educational resources for parents who are homeschooling.

Their downtown offices are a place where people come to read, talk and learn.

One issue in poverty is a lack of books in the home, Keller said. “We have a gifting library,” Keller said. “We give thousands of books away every year.”

The nonprofit also donates computers to children and works diligently to increase key primary reading skills.

Keller said the immigrant population was among the first to lose jobs at the onset of the crisis including landscapers, housekeepers and caretakers of the elderly.

Even though evictions are on hold, by emergency order, until July 15, not everyone understands their rights.

Some people call Orion for help, including mothers with hungry children who aren’t always sure what questions to ask.

“It often is true that asking for help is the hardest part — either embarrassment or pride or not knowing where to start — fortunately Orion’s case management team are compassionate professionals and are knowledgeable about so many resources that the first meetings are productive in getting answers and a plan for next steps,” Keller said.

As a place of hope, Keller said, Orion ensures that people who come to the center on Bridge Street for help leave with a smile and a plan.

Orion has 9 employees and 100 volunteers. Some make supply deliveries and others help with technology.

“Orion has been on the frontline of the economic crisis since middle-of-March,” said Melinda Izzo, operations manager. “We are serving our clients through a baby monitor, and computer

kiosk, virtual hugs, our staff working in masks, one of our case managers who is juggling home schooling her children while working full time, volunteer delivering essentials for families and a staff Zoom meeting.”

As operations manager, Izzo oversees programs including STARS, GLAD and Bridges Out of Poverty.

She said Sharing Technology Advances Reading Skills (STARS) began in 2017 to close the educational gap that exists between children from poverty and their more well-to-do peers.

Izzo said Gutsy Ladies Achieving Their Destinies (GLAD) began in 2018 and includes 26 single mothers.

“We have a monthly support group with 9 participants,” Izzo said. “Since the pandemic we have found creative ways to support both our GLAD and STARS participants . . . They are raising children, homeschooling, two are in school themselves and they do this alone.”

Finally, there’s Bridges Out of Poverty.

“Orion formed a steering committee in 2018 to bring Bridges Out of Poverty to the community. The Bridges framework provides training so that stakeholders in the community can view poverty through a similar lens . . . Our hope that we can build a community in which everyone can live well,” Izzo said.

Keller said Bridges Out of Poverty is a learning program that encourages the “community to talk how to collectively build bridges for our neighbors in need.” Orion trained 600 staff members of local schools in August and September and hopes to train 1,000 more people this year.

To reach Orion, call 610-415-1140 or visit <https://orioncommunities.org>.

