

Hope in abundance

WNC's collective spirit carries us forward

BY LISA ALLEN

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It's been a challenging year across the globe — wars, gaping political divides, ferocious weather events and a host of other ills. In WNC, our families, neighbors and friends also faced struggles with encroaching development, a visible unhoused community, downtown crime and a wage-and-cost-of-living mismatch amid a hit-or-miss safety net.

But life is nothing without hope, and fortunately, this area is rife with it. Collectively, people across our communities worked throughout 2023 to make our region sustainable, fair, just and supportive. Volunteers at Asheville GreenWorks, for example, dedicated countless hours across multiple cleanup days to improve the environmental conditions of our waterways and neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Made by Mountains launched its Outdoor Equity Fund, a \$125,000 grant program that aims to support individuals and organizations focused on advancing equity in outdoor recreation. And athletes across our city continued to raise funds for nonprofits through AVL Hoppers, a volleyball league dedicated to charitable giving.

In this spirit, *Xpress* reached out to dozens of local residents to discuss what keeps them hopeful heading into 2024. As you read their responses below, may you find their optimism contagious.

Who is your local hero of the year and why?

“My local heroes of the year are the first responders for the work they do round the clock, every day of the

year, in challenging circumstances. I am especially appreciative of the relationships they build in the community with people who need help, with people who care about those who are in need and with colleagues within the broad first-responders community.”

— **Amanda Edwards**,
Buncombe County commissioner

“My local hero is not just one person, but many: All of you out there doing mutual aid work in our community. Whether you're fighting for food justice, housing equity or something else, your work is needed, and I see you and appreciate you so much. Some notable groups you should check out are Asheville Survival Program, 12 Baskets, Asheville Solidarity Network, BeLoved and, on UNCA's campus, the Food Equity Initiative.”

— **Allie Daum**,
senior at UNC Asheville

“My local hero is **Austin McIver ‘Mack’ Dennis**, the senior pastor of First Baptist Church — that huge dome you can see from almost anywhere in Asheville. In most every respect, Mack is not what you would expect. His ‘talk’ and his ‘walk’ have to do first and foremost with reconciliation in a time of division and conflict. He is heavily involved in Project Aspire, intended to create affordable workforce housing, early childhood development and educational opportunities for downtown.”

— **Terry Roberts**,
author

“Hmm ... I don't believe in heroes, so I'll just nominate all the black bears, who, by giving absolutely zero f*cks, have won our hearts, dominated social media, gone viral worldwide and redefined what it means to live, laugh and love in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Plus, they only knock over my trash cans when they contain scraps from the best restaurants in the area, so I know they have impeccable taste in garbage.”



THE GREATER GOOD: Asheville GreenWorks regularly rallies volunteers to tidy up the community, one item at a time. Looking toward 2024, dozens of residents share what local initiatives give them hope for the new year. Photo courtesy of GreenWorks

— **Stu Helm**,
food blogger and food tour guide,
Stu Helm Food Fan

“**alexandria monque ravenel** and her commendable efforts to ‘Bring Black Back to The Block.’ She is my local hero because she helps elevate the dreams and businesses of folks who look like us. She is the creator and owner of Noir Collective AVL, a boutique, art gallery and bookstore featuring Black entrepreneurs located on The Block within the retail spaces of YMI Cultural Center, one of the oldest operating African American cultural centers in the United States.”

— **Karis Roberts**,
executive director,
Asheville Brewers Alliance

“My heroes are the men, women and children that have been affected by the closing of [the] Evergreen Packaging [paper mill]. In the face of severe emotional and economic trauma, these people have found a way to put one foot in front of the other with the confidence that better days are ahead. Like so many these days, their smiles hide their struggles, but they believe in each other, their community and its survival.”

— **Zeb Smathers**,
Canton mayor

“**David Rodgers** is my local hero for his multiyear effort to rebuild Jones

Park in North Asheville. When the park was razed in 2021, David didn't hesitate to pick up the baton and spend two years of his life convincing city leaders to sign a multiagency agreement to maintain the park, then organizing a massive effort of 1,000-plus volunteers working over five days in October to rebuild the park as Candace Pickens Memorial Park.”

— **Brooke Heaton**,
web architect

What should be the community's top priority for 2024?

“From my perspective, creative policies for maintaining and increasing Asheville's flora and fauna, which may include developing neighborhood nurseries and pocket forests.”

— **Keith Aitken**,
urban forester, City of Asheville

“Let's have more real, meaningful conversations where collaborative visions are brought to the table for smart, manageable growth. We are fortunate to be a part of a place that is managing the challenges of success rather than struggling in an atrophying community. More ‘and’ conversations and fewer ‘either/or’ conversations will foster greater cooperation and create opportunities for more people to succeed in the years to come. We all have different roles to play, and

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