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Student served food to rescue crews in Marion

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Amidst the devastation of Hurricane Helene, one of the most striking things 16-year-old Wyatt Spencer witnessed was the desire of people to help one another.

"I saw hundreds of people who just lost everything, but the only thing they wanted to do was help the other person who lost everything else," Spencer said.

Spencer also noted the devastation he saw while volunteering in areas hit by the storm. He said he saw pictures on the news and, to a degree, knew what to expect. Seeing it himself put the damage into perspective.

"After seeing the community and the devastation up there on a firsthand level ... I knew I had to come back and help for as long as I could," Spencer said. "There's so many people in need."

He added, "There's people that don't know what they're going to do in the next stage of their life. And to some people, seeing you walk over with the cold drink, hot food and a smile on your face is the best part of their day. And you don't know how much longer it could be before they get that again."

Spencer said he was born and raised in Catawba County. He is an 11th-grade student at Bandys High School.

Spencer said he has volunteered in Spruce Pine, Burnsville, Red Hill, Bat Cave and around Lake Tahoma in McDowell County.

"No one asked him to do this," said Spencer's mother, Kristen Crawford. "(And) he didn't ask my permission. He said he was going."

Spencer said on an average day of volunteering, he would wake up at 3:45 a.m. to 4 a.m. and drive to a location over an hour away. He said he would get home around 11 p.m., sleep and repeat.

Three hours of sleep was a good night of sleep, Spencer said.

Crawford said she cannot put to words how proud she is of Spencer, though she is concerned about his mental health at times with everything he is witnessing.

"But he loves it, and he keeps going back for more, and he feels a calling for it," Crawford said.

Spencer said he plans to continue volunteering.

Spencer shared his experiences in an interview. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MIYA BANKS, HICKORY DAILY RECORD

Wyatt Spencer is a 16-year-old junior at Bandys High School. Spencer said he has spent up to 120 hours volunteering in parts of western North Carolina that were devastated by Hurricane Helene.

CONTRIBUTED BY WYATT SPENCER

Wyatt Spencer, second from left, stands with a group of volunteers and N.C. State Highway Patrolmen.

CONTRIBUTED BY WYATT SPENCER

Wyatt Spencer took this photo during his time volunteering in western North Carolina.

What made you want to volunteer?

It kind of started with my girlfriend's dad, Stephen Parker. He's a state trooper. I heard he was going up there with the N.C. Troopers Association and the North Carolina Fraternal Order of Police. As soon as I heard he was going up there, I knew immediately I wanted to go after seeing what had been done to the places up there. I knew I wanted to go and help people in need.

What was the most striking thing you saw?

The biggest thing I saw was the community coming together. I mean, I've seen a lot of bad, but through all the bad, I've seen a lot of good. I saw hundreds of people who just lost everything, but the only thing they wanted to do was help the other person who lost everything else. I met a couple who lost their house, and pretty much everyone they knew was presumably missing. We tried to bring them supplies one day, and even though they were running low on stuff, they wanted to pass it on to the next person. They said, 'We have enough to get us by for now, give it to the next person.' And even seeing rescue crews. You name a state, they were there. There was just so much good in a time of bad.

What type of volunteer work are you doing?

I served food to any rescue crews, any emergency personnel, because we were staged at the McDowell County emergency operations center, and we were serving around 1,500 meals a day for the first few days for emergency personnel and anybody in the community who needed them. And then, as the week went on, we slowed down a little bit. We probably got around 1,000 each day. I started out doing that.

And then I wanted to get more physically involved. I started doing supply runs for people that had no access to anything and started taking food to crews who were in places where they were working 18-20 hour days but weren't getting fed anything throughout the day. What I would do is, I would load up with hot food and cold drinks and take that to them while they were in the field.

Later in the week, I started doing some more hands-on stuff and went up towards Red Hill. We cut some roads up and cleared some driveways and stuff for people who, nobody had really got to them yet. Luckily, they were fine and they had plenty of supplies. But we made it to where they could get out of the driveway for the first time in 10 days.

What values have you grown up with?

Leadership is probably the biggest one, especially in a world like today where everybody kind of wants to see what the people around them are doing. Going ahead and taking charge and showing people the way we should be doing stuff instead of letting them try and figure it out on their own. That, and we need to help the people around us. Definitely caring. My mom owns Endeavors Pediatric Therapy in Statesville, that has a huge role in caring for kids in the community. So, caring is one of the biggest things. Also hardship. Like, not letting something stop you. Keep going and keep pushing until you get the results you want.

What makes you happy or gives you joy?

One of the biggest things that really made me happy and gave me joy is helping people, especially in the past week. Nothing made me feel better than coming home every single day knowing I helped as many people as I could within a community that just lost everything. Even the first responders in the field that had been working for 15 hours, it made them so happy just to have a hot meal in their hands. Whereas somebody that just lost their house, their cars, everything, and they're living in a shed that's 10 foot by 10 foot now, you bring them a case of water and a bag of snacks, and they're more than excited to see you. That's something that makes me happy. Success also makes me happy. Like, achieving a goal definitely makes me happy.

What motivates you?

I want to inspire people, and I want to be seen as a leader within my community. I want people to look up to me and really see what our generation can do. I feel like our generation is really looked down on. We make a lot of bad choices, but I want to show the world there's always hope for the future generations.

Miya Banks is an education reporter at the Hickory Daily Record.

Walgreens confirms plans to close 500 stores

RICHARD CRAVER
Winston-Salem Journal

The parent company of the Walgreens pharmacy chain announced plans recently to eliminate 1,200 locations by the end of 2027, of which 500 will take place during 2025.

The company did not disclose store closing plans. It has 15 locations each in Forsyth and Guilford counties.

Walgreens Boots Alliance Inc. reported a $3 billion loss for its fourth quarter, of which $2.08 billion represented an income-tax provision. It had a $180 million loss a year ago.

For fiscal 2024, Walgreens had an $8.64 billion loss, compared with $3.08 billion in fiscal 2023.

"In fiscal 2025, we are focusing on stabilizing the retail pharmacy by optimizing our footprint, controlling operating costs, improving cash flow, and continuing to address reimbursement models to support dispensing margins and preserve patient access for the future," said Tim Wentworth, Walgreens' chief executive.

"This turnaround will take time, but we are confident it will yield significant financial and consumer benefits over the long term."

*Ask for details, minimum purchase may be required. Limit one per household. (1) New orders only for appointments scheduled between 10/31/2024. Not valid with any other offer or previous purchase. (2) Financing available with minimum purchase and approved credit. All financing is provided by unaffiliated third-party lenders. Price and payments may vary based on products and time of purchase. (3) Licensed and Insured FL, NC 861541 | SC:54219 | VA:2705162005 | DC:420332100019 | . (4) Must be local homeowner to receive gift card. Gift card may be sent electronically via email, ask for details. See website for all offer details. Offers are subject to change without notice until time of purchase.

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