Communities in Schools leaders honored for their work

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Few couples have had as much impact on education as Neil Shorthouse and Patty Pflum – the husband and wife team who, until this summer, headed Communities in Schools of Georgia and Communities in Schools of Atlanta respectively.

Given their decades of service to Communities in Schools, the Atlanta business and civic community held a reception in their honor at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta on the evening of Nov. 18 – a location that Shorthouse found to be wonderfully ironic.

"I went through a 10-year period with CIS on the 15th and 30th of every month....when I did not know three days of when payroll was due where that money was coming from," said Shorthouse, then looking to host Marie Gooding of Federal Reserve. "She has this party where there is all this money. It is a stroke of huge irony."

Communities in Schools, now a national organization that touches 1.35 million young people a year, can trace its roots back to the early 70s when Shorthouse, Bill Milliken and the late David Lewis established Cities in Schools in Atlanta, a public/private partnership to help urban kids graduate from high school and plan successful futures. Years later, the name was changed to Communities in Schools.

During his talk to family, friends, associates and former CIS students, Shorthouse said he had been doing the work for 51 years.

He hugged his successor Carol Lewis, who has been a 20-year veteran of CIS, serving as chief operating officer for the past five years of CIS-Georgia.

But he made it clear he and Pflum were staying in the game.

"I can't think of a more obscene word than retire," Shorthouse said, adding that given the problems in today's society, the more appropriate word is "rally" to help students in need.
"We are facing the greatest moral, ethical and economic challenge in this country today with these children," Shorthouse said. "The most important institution in this country is public schools. We need to commit ourselves to that challenge. This is a fight for the dignity of human beings. This is a fight for the soul of this country. You have a lot of work to do, and so do I."

Pflum clearly was moved by the recognition she received. She has been executive director of CIS-Atlanta since 1995, and she has been affiliated with CIS since its founding in 1972.

The new executive director of CIS-Atlanta is Frank Brown, who began his post in August. Before joining CIS, Brown served as the first executive director of the Butler Street Community Development Corp., formerly known as the historic Butler Street YMCA.

When Pflum stepped to the podium, she was overcome with emotion, but she said CIS had really become a family for everyone involved.

During his talk, Shorthouse purposefully did not want to thank everyone in the audience other than family members. He made only one exception.

"One of the first people I met was in the Heart of Atlanta hotel on Courtland Street where the Hilton now sits and that is Howell Adams," Shorthouse said. "He is an enormous friend, he and Madeline. I'm grateful for all you have done."

Atlanta reaches out to Honduras

The president of Honduras, who was in Atlanta on Nov. 13, had only wonderful comments to share about the role Georgians have played in helping develop parts of his country.

President Juan Orlando Hernández attended a breakfast at the Piedmont Driving Club hosted by Ernest Greer of the Greenberg Traurig law firm where he was able to meet with several Atlanta dignitaries.

In a short interview, Hernández said he was delighted with being in Atlanta and visiting with former President Jimmy Carter and being able to honor the leaders of Atlanta-based nonprofit HOI (formerly Honduras Outreach Inc.), a 25-year-old organization.

"We are really grateful," he said. "This area where they started is a rural area. The impact is tremendous. They work with the community. They teach people how to get out of poverty. I'm trying to adopt some of the ideas to apply to the whole country. We call it 'Better Life.' We are trying to figure how we can create a more comprehensive program."

Hernández said that one of the reason he was in Atlanta was to meet with business leaders to talk about building closer ties between Georgia and Honduras.

United Way: help homeless women veterans

A challenge was issued at the 7th annual Women’s Leadership Breakfast of the United Way of Greater Atlanta on Nov. 13 at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis.

The challenge? To house homeless female veterans through United Way's Vets Connect Initiative.
"Forty percent of the nation's homeless female veterans live in five states – including Georgia," said Milton Little, president and CEO of Atlanta's United Way. "Through Vets Connect, we focus on connecting eligible veterans with case management and housing vouchers, which is critical to decreasing the number of homeless veterans in the Atlanta region."

Last year, United Way's Regional Commission on Homelessness ended homelessness for nearly 400 veterans. The goal is to end homelessness for an additional 500 by June 2015. For just $2,000, a homeless female veteran and her family can be taken off the streets, put into permanent housing and placed on a path to success.

The nearly 1,000 breakfast attendees were introduced to Angelica Solomon, a formerly homeless veteran, who spoke about her battle with PTSD and how she made the transition from homelessness into permanent housing through the Vets Connect Initiative.

Today Solomon serves on United Way's Peers Reaching Out (PRO) Team. The PRO Team is largely made up of formerly homeless veterans who now help serve those who faced the same struggle.

Jimmy Carter – keynote speaker

Former President Jimmy Carter was the keynote speaker at the Women's Leadership Breakfast – giving a rousing talk about the plight of women around the world and in the United States.

Carter, who has just published his 28th book – "A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power," said it was the most important book he has ever written.

"For the past three years, we have focused our studies on the abuse of women and girls around the world, which is a lot worse than many of in the room know about," he said.

Starting out with shock value, he said that 97 percent of the women in Somalia have had their genitals mutilated. In Egypt, its 90 percent. Genital cutting is prevalent is several African countries, and it often can be serious surgery.

The rights of women and girls are often non-existent.

"Quite innocent girls are raped by a stranger, and then the girls are murdered by their own mothers or fathers or brothers (because of the shame brought on their family)," Carter said. "At this moment, there are more than 160 million girls missing from the face of the earth."

And the problems are not just outside the United States. Carter went on to talk about the problems of sexual assault on college campuses and the U.S. military as well as sex trafficking, which is especially prevalent in Atlanta.

When asked how long he would continue his post-presidency work, Carter said that he and Rosalynn "will continue as long as we are physically able to do our work."

They recently built 14 homes for Habitat for Humanity. He still teaches Sunday school. And he has 12 grand-children and 10 great-grandchildren. "We have a good life," he said.

Ivan Allen College Prize for Social Courage
Beatrice Mtetwa, a woman who has been fighting for justice in Zimbabwe and throughout the world, received the fourth Ivan Allen Jr. Prize for Social Courage on Nov. 13.

The award is given by the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts at Georgia Tech, and it comes with a $100,000 cash prize.

Georgia Tech President Bud Peterson, in his introduction of Mtetwa, said she is the oldest of 50 children and that her father had six wives. Despite a lifetime of challenges, she always remained hopeful that she could help people find justice through the rule of law.

In accepting the prize, Mtetwa said she didn't even know how Georgia Tech had heard of her (she was nominated by journalist Charlayne Hunter Gault, who is on the selection committee).

She has been outspoken for human rights, which she has to defend as a universal right and not a Euro-centric idea.

"Those rights are universal in nature and should be enjoyed by every living soul," she said.

After accepting the prize, in a brief interview, Mtetwa was asked about having 50 siblings. "At least," she said.

"I always had an antagonistic relationship with my father because I always challenged him," she said. "I was not going to have my education compromised because he got another wife. I was drawn to law because I have a background that was used to challenging authority."

Maria Saporta covers non-profits and philanthropy