

A BIG LOSS

Charlotte has lost a giant, with an even bigger heart. Chris Wolf was 6' 7" tall and solidly built. When entering a crowded room, he was easy to spot — literally head and shoulders above the crowd.

He came up the hard way in West Virginia. Shaking off the dust of Appalachian poverty, he put himself through the University of West Virginia and graduate school at UNC. His intelligence and drive then took him to Wall Street. A job at a big bank lured him to Charlotte the first time. It was the 1980s, as Tryon Street was beginning its emulation of Wall Street.

A little over a decade ago, Chris came to the realization that if all you do is work for money, then all you ever get out of life is money. He took a giant leap out of the corporate world, leveraging his experience as a Habitat for Humanity volunteer into a job with Habitat. He went to Phoenix and became Habitat's executive director for Arizona. There he found his passion — helping to house those who could not house themselves. By trading his suit and German-built sedan for blue jeans and a Ford pick-up truck, Chris found fulfillment.

Charlotte drew him back, though. Around six years ago, a newly formed homeless advocacy group (now known as A Way Home) was looking for its first executive director. Chris walked in for an interview and before he walked out, the selection committee knew they had found their man.

At the time of Chris's hiring, there were a dozen or more agencies working on improving the plight of the homeless in our community. These organizations shared passions and drive to help those our community often ignored. Sometimes, though, differing philosophies, territorial jealousies, and funding competition kept these agencies from achieving everything that they could (individually and collaboratively). Plus, political and community indifference and misunderstanding helped exacerbate the situation for our homeless citizens.

Chris took on the task of nudging our homeless agencies, sometimes gently, sometimes with a bit more force, to even greater collaboration and more holistic thinking. He raised his considerable voice so that local government and business leaders began to understand the seriousness of the problems of the homeless. Concern replaced indifference. And out of greater collaboration and concern came action.

The fruits of Chris's labors are now apparent: a permanent emergency winter shelter, our community's 10-year plan to end homelessness, more supportive housing for the chronically homeless, the WISH (Workforce Initiative for Supportive Housing) program to help working families find stable housing, an annual homelessness awareness walk and the list goes on.

Chris would have been the first to tell you that these were not his accomplishments or even his ideas, and he would be right. These are the accomplishments and ideas of many. What they have in common, though, was that Chris was always there, in the room, suggesting this approach or demanding that outcome and doing whatever he could to translate ideas into results.

Chris was not always a gentle soul. He was not always diplomatic. Chris had a limited capacity for suffering fools, and it would overflow on occasion. Agency heads and politicians have been known to cringe when they saw him lumbering toward them, but his bluntness always served a purpose — to make us see and hear the homeless, to make us see their lot and hear their voice, to call us to account for our indifference. He could be a pain, but he was a pain that we needed to feel. He was like an irritant in our collective eye — he made us blink, and when our vision cleared, we saw the need and we saw how we should help.

On Thursday night, December 3rd, Chris died at the age of 54 of a sudden heart attack. The homeless in our community lost a voice for compassion and solutions. The community lost a bit of its conscience. Many of us lost a dear friend. His family lost a loving husband and doting father. We all lost a giant who fought the fights worth fighting.

Those of us left behind owe Chris only one thing — to keep working so that everyone in Charlotte can go home at night to a place that is clean, warm, dry and safe. Good bye, big guy. Thanks for everything.