

CITIZEN OF THE YEAR: Chris Douglas

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Chris Douglas has been the Communities in Schools executive director for 15 years.

NEW BRAUNFELS — It would be accurate to say Christine Evans Douglas has helped thousands of people over the years — the ones who need it the most.

During her 35-year career, she's been there for families — specifically at-risk children — and she's weathered each challenge with the zeal and enthusiasm for life itself. For the past 15 years, her sole focus — outside of her family — has been Communities in Schools of South Central Texas, which helps youths make their way out of their economically disadvantaged situations and into productive lives.

The boundless energy she's put into making those lives better can't be measured, but only recognized. And that's why she's the New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung's Citizen of the Year.

“She’s well deserving of it,” said her husband, Ray. “You couldn’t write an article long enough to explain all of the things she tries to do and with no thought of return. She just gives and gives and gives without thinking of getting anything back — except for the gratification she gets from the kids or other programs that help kids.”

Her early path

Chris related a recent thrill she had of jumping out of an airplane.

“I’ve always loved excitement,” she said. “I would drive a race car. ... I was a surfer when I was young. I love adventuresome, fast things.”

She wasn’t afraid of taking that plunge, and wasn’t afraid years ago when she began the journey that brought her to where she is today.

She was the fourth of six children born to Gordon and Betty Evans. Growing up in Houston, she saw her future play out in her household. Her parents became foster parents when she was about 12, “exposing me to children who had been abused, neglected or totally abandoned.”

Seeing her parents’ love for others — no matter their background, color or socio-economic status — led her to earn a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Southwest Texas State in 1974 and in 1976 into the field of social work with the state and Child Protective Services.

Over the next 15 years, Chris served as a caseworker in Houston, Corpus Christi and New Braunfels, where she supervised a child abuse investigation unit and was supervisor of a 28-county area in South Texas.

She moved here in 1985, where she met her future husband Ray, an investigator with the New Braunfels Police Department. Ray worked with Chris investigating abuse claims here in New Braunfels.

Ray said he and Chris were paired together while investigating the death of an 18-month-old.

“We were together for weeks going through that, and she sat through a lot of things that child abuse investigators don’t normally go through,” he said. “She learned a lot of things about law enforcement, and we learned what social workers do.”

“Anyway, we got to hanging out with each other and took the team concept a little further than what most people did at the time.”

Two years later, they were married.

“I was a single parent with three children, and he decided to marry me — even with three young kids, which is a pretty huge commitment,” Chris said. “He has been an absolutely wonderful father to our children.”

Their relationship enabled Chris to pursue higher goals. She earned a master’s in social work from Our Lady of the Lake University in 1991. The following year, Chris joined Adoption Affiliates — a non-profit adoption agency based in San Antonio — as its executive director.

“I remained there for five years and loved it very much,” she said. “I was able to meet so many wonderful people — adoptive parents as well as birthmothers. It was an emotional journey to experience the deep love of a mother who made the decision to allow other parents to raise her child.”

She became Licensed Master Social Worker in 1997. About the same time, travel involved with her job kept her away from her children — who by now were in middle school and high school — she decided to apply for something closer to home. She got it when she was named as CIS’s third executive director this very same week in 1997.

“When I first started, another executive director told me that the “life expectancy” of a non-profit executive director was three to five years,” Chris said. “I’ve beaten the odds — and I’m enjoying it!! I’m not ready to throw in the towel any time soon.”

At CIS

Her current position hasn’t been devoid of challenges. When Chris arrived, the local CIS had an annual budget of \$470,000 and served about 1,100 at-risk students in 12 schools in two school districts. Last year, its \$1.8 million budget served 3,200 students in 32 schools in four school districts.

Under Chris’ leadership, CIS has expanded into an after-school program, mentoring program, thrift store and other programs that ensure at-risk students not only stay in school, but graduate and have a post-graduation plan for the future.

Last year, CIS faced a major challenge. Although it benefits from grants from several foundations and business enterprises, a lot of funding comes from school districts and the state, which themselves faced staggering budget cuts.

Dozens of CIS supporters attended an NBISD trustees meeting in May, urging the school board not to drastically cut CIS funding.

Joseph Hernandez was about to graduate with a master's in education from the University of Texas. He recalled how tough it was when he entered middle school, and how a CIS mentor helped get him through that awkward time and set him on his career path.

"We want (CIS) to be at the forefront when you do make that decision," he said. I learned how to put first things first," he said. "I didn't have a dangerous home situation, but the programs run by CIS helped mentor me through my life."

Another NBISD grad, Alexa Cantu, was also thankful for the program.

"Without CIS I wouldn't have graduated — I would've gotten a GED," said Cantu, who is attending college. "During that time I didn't think I would be able to make it. Teachers are great, but they can't help people who are in crisis. ... and at risk of dropping out."

Thanks to other funding sources, CIS was able to maintain its presence in the school districts and keep kids on those paths to success.

"Chris is one of our greatest advocates for children. The Communities in Schools counselors meet a critical need at our campuses and I'm confident they wouldn't be there without Chris' dedication and sheer tenacity," he said.

"She is driven, for sure, and I know that's what it takes to keep this important program not just alive in our schools, but thriving."

In August, about the same time as CIS stages its annual "Pack The Bus" campaign, which collects school supplies for thousands of students, its Hinman House offices are full of supplies for older kids headed to college.

Dorm room items, such as portable shelves, small furniture, bathroom towels and other things, are stacked high in offices. The students are indeed grateful, as many can't afford much more than tuition and room and board.

"I feel so proud — they are just like my children," Chris said.

Chris has a yellow folder near her desk, aptly titled "Warm Fuzzies." Inside are dozens of thank-you notes she's received from the students, parents and staff.

"It feels good to know that I'm doing the right thing. I feel that God leads me in everything I do, and that things come together for a reason. I'm so lucky to find the most amazing people to work here — they are so committed.

Staffers compiled an embossed memory book in honor of Chris' 15 years at CIS. Inside are photos of staff members' families and other mementos collected over the years. Along with a patchwork quilt of all of the CIS schools she stitched together for her 10th anniversary at CIS, the book is among Chris's prized possessions.

"This book is put together by them," she said. "It's about life being all about family, and family is all about love."

Family ties

Chris and Ray have a "Brady Bunch" kind of marriage — with his two boys and her two boys and daughter — Kenneth Douglas, Bobby (and Liz) Douglas, Jeremy (and Anna) Rader, Nathan Rader, and Allison (and Chris) Geggatt. They now range in age from 45 to 28.

"I want to apologize to them for spending so much time at work — I'm a little bit of a workaholic," she said. "They joke with me because whenever I had to pick them up from practice or whatever, they would be the last ones standing there. I'd be 30 minutes to an hour late. I used to joke with them that it made them have character."

Ray says that Chris's devotion to her job never surpassed her love for her family. He said she always did the little things to prove it.

"She never missed much of anything important that the kids were in, and she made everyday a special day for the kids," he said. "Whether it was drawing little smiley faces on their backpacks to fixing their lunches — I don't ever think the kids ever missed it."

Ray admits Chris has a playful side.

"She's a risk-taker. A few months ago she went skydiving with our niece and she jumped out of a perfectly good airplane for the first time," he said. "Unless you had to, it's not a good thing to do. But she's a risk-taker — she climbs mountains, stands on the point, and bungee jumps. She is a little crazy in that sense, but I'm the other way."

Chris says despite the serious nature of her work, she loves doing the ridiculous every now and then. She loves doing cartwheels in odd places, and had photos of herself cart wheeling in places like Enchanted Rock.

On a tour of the Pentagon in 1998, she did seven cartwheels down a hall.

"I was with a group of friends and it was on a weekend and no one was there," she said. "We were walking down a hall with a bunch of pictures of generals on the wall. I asked my friends if they thought I could do seven cartwheels down that hall."

“I told my husband about it and he said, ‘They’ve got a file on you!’”

The Douglasses also have six grandchildren, ages 15 to 11-month-old twins.

“Being with grandchildren is a cure for whatever ails you,” Chris said. “I love all my grandkids so much — they bring me GREAT joy. They call me Gran. I am lucky to have had so much experience with babies when my parents were foster parents, it made me VERY experienced and ready to help when the grandbabies were born!”

“I have made it a policy to see all the little grandkids every week after they were born so they wouldn’t ever forget me and I could snuggle and love on them as much as I could. There is not much that makes me happier in my time off from CIS to be able to spend time with our grandkids!”

Ray, who’s settled in his retirement after years with the NBPB — including eight years as chief — said he doubts Chris will ever give up what she’s doing. He said his wife is too restless to quit.

“She’ll be doing this until she’s 85 or 90 years old,” he said, laughing. “She won’t ever retire. ...there’s no grass that’s going to grow beneath her.”

Citizen of the Year

Ray Douglas said his wife is totally deserving of the honor.

“There’s not many more who are more giving, and all of the community is better off for the things that and her program has done,” Ray said. “It’s not that others aren’t deserving — there are some, I’m sure. But there aren’t many awards for someone in her business, other than the personal gratification, and I’m certainly glad someone has recognized her for her input into the community.”

Chris likes to use the metaphor of her job being a rollercoaster ride, all the time requiring balance and perseverance.

“Heading back down from the top, it’s a fast ride and you’ve got to hold on tight to be sure you are in your seat — staying within your expenses, continuing to find new sponsors and donors, and remembering that it’s at the times you least expect it that kids are in crisis and you need to be there for them,” she said.

“At the bottom there’s a short time to coast and enjoy the ride or bask in your successes, proudly sharing your programs’ successes and results before you head for the incline to try to reach the top again.

“For every time you go down you know you’ll be going up again. If you have your friends along with you for the ride it can be the best experience ever.”

Chris said a line from George Bernard Shaw serves as her mantra.

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”

For however how many years she has left doing what she does, Chris is fortunate to have chosen her profession.

“I’m so blessed to just be a part of such a wonderful program and work with such wonderful people that I care so much about,” she said. “I love being part of everything that happens here.”