

Two old foes team up for a good cause

FOES

By Ross Williams

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Once candidates for the same office, former Democratic Gov. Roy Barnes and Republican businessman Guy Millner are uniting to help fight addiction and homelessness in Cobb County.

The two faced off to become Georgia's governor back in 1998, but in a visit to the MDJ's offices this week, the former rivals said that's all behind them now.

"Oh, we weren't rivals, we were just friendly competitors," Barnes said, eliciting a laugh from Millner.

"A rival is somebody you don't want to have supper with," Millner said.

The two have joined forces to support the Extension, a center dedicated to treating homeless people struggling with addiction. In September, the Marietta City Council approved plans for a major expansion for the men's shelter near the intersection of Church Street Extension and Loudermilk Drive that will more than double the capacity there.

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Businessman Guy Millner, left, and former Gov. Roy Barnes.

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The Extension also operates a women's shelter on a different campus in Marietta, as well as off-site housing for clients who are further along in their treatment. All told, the Extension has 82 treatment beds in Cobb County, and that number will grow to 120 after the expansion.

The construction is projected to cost \$5.6 million and be complete in late 2022. The Extension has already raised \$2 million of those funds.

Barnes and Millner said they were eager to support the project both with their own donations and by getting the word out.

Barnes, who also serves on the board of directors for MUST Ministries, said he views helping those in need as an obligation of his Christian faith.

“I think both of us are driven by our faith commitment, which is a large part of the Extension. ... We have fellow human beings, and our faith requires us and convicts us to be of help, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and help those that are addicted and are homeless. And we know that in fulfilling that, as Christians should do, that these are the type of things we should be involved in as Christians, and boy, there’s a need out there,” he said.

Millner agreed, and said he had been personally moved by the plight of the homeless, including while doing volunteer work for United Way.

“Coming to the expressways, to the overpasses in downtown Atlanta at five o’clock and seeing the help that United Way brings with these counselors, sitting on the side of the expressway with a homeless person that’s got everything they’ve got in a plastic bag, a plastic garbage bag – Everything they’ve got is in that bag, and trying to persuade that person to take United Way’s help, or wherever the help might come from, it just works at you,” he said.

Millner said he was searching for more ways to help when he met Extension Executive Director Tyler Driver and board of directors chair Skip Harper and was immediately impressed.

“I know how important leadership is, and (Harper) and Tyler are a great team. ... It’s a great foundation. You oftentimes find these organizations that are dysfunctional, they’re well-intended, but they don’t have leadership. ... This group has capacity, and that’s what attracted me to them.”

Millner said he was particularly impressed that the Extension’s methods include a major focus on accountability.

Driver said every Extension client holds a job, and those who have minor children always fulfill their parental responsibilities.

“When they come into our program, if they have minor children, the first thing they’re going to do is become financially responsible for that child, and it’s not the courts telling them, it’s our telling them, and it’s their willingness. ... They see there’s a path, and we put big lights on that path. They see it clearly, and they’re going to follow it along, and then they’re going to be the mentors. They’re going to be the alumni that are helping the new folks coming in.”

Barnes said in his role at MUST, he has seen an increase in women and children dealing with homelessness, about 70%, according to the latest numbers.

“Now why are they coming in as homeless women and children? There was some guy who didn’t pay,” he said. “The father, the husband got addicted, and couldn’t support his wife and children and they became homeless. So ... the more they treat, the less we have, because they’re supporting children, and they don’t become homeless. It’s all of these things working together. It doesn’t do any good to anybody unless there’s a solution, and the greatest solution that can help in the homeless problem is addiction treatment and stepping up to the plate for men, stepping up to the plate and supporting their kids.”

Driver said the numbers show the process works. Of the residents who stay in the program for at least 60 days, 75% reach long-term stability. Driver said over 1,000 people have completed the Extension’s program and have

become productive members of society.

Driver said Barnes and Millner's efforts show addiction is an issue that impacts people of all political stripes, and he hopes neighbors of all persuasions will chip in to help the cause.

"This is why these guys are leaders," he said. "There are no partisan differences when it comes to helping our neighbors overcome addiction and reach their potential. Certain aspects of public life are debatable. Caring for others isn't one of them."

Businessman Guy Millner, left, and former Gov. Roy Barnes.

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