

# Rescuing Kalamazoo

## AMERICAN RED CROSS CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

BY ANDREW DOMINO



Pictured above, Nancy Kowalski—Disaster Action Team Captain for Red Cross of Southwest Michigan. On the right, Betty Lee Ongley—a past chair and a Red Cross volunteer since 1950.

Kalamazoo's Red Cross is marking 100 years of service with a renewed look at its mission, thanks to veteran volunteers, and new ones. According to its website, the American Red Cross of Southwest Michigan includes eight counties: Allegan, Van Buren, Berrien, Cass, Kalamazoo, Calhoun, St. Joseph and Branch. It was founded in 1917 as part of a national campaign to boost the Red Cross' volunteer efforts during the First World War. The local office is now near West Michigan Avenue and 11th Street.

"We have a presentation each month about things I didn't know we did," said Red Cross volunteer Whitney Kemerling of Kalamazoo, an attorney and board member.

### Hurricane Relief

Vicki Eichstaedt, a long-time volunteer and west Michigan native, said she got her start with the Red Cross in 2005, joining the relief effort for victims of Hurricane Katrina. She learned how to feed hundreds of people, provide shelter and even consider their state of mind, after they have seen their homes and possessions washed away. It's a skill set she brought back to Michigan, as local Red Cross volunteers supported Katrina evacuees at Fort Custer in Battle Creek. They were also on hand after the 1980 tornado that struck the heart of downtown Kalamazoo and killed five. "There's a lot more to helping than just wanting to," Eichstaedt said. "I know at the end of the day, my efforts have really gone to help someone who's suffering."

Helping others has been a lifetime goal for Betty Lee Ongley, a past chair of the local Red Cross and a volunteer since 1950. "I got started with

the blood drives," she said. "I took the streetcar in Detroit down to give blood. Then I was a volunteer when I moved to Kalamazoo. Ongley said as an administrator and a participant in activities like teaching first aid and providing supplies to disaster victims, she's glad to see how the Red Cross coordinates with local police and fire fighters to handle area emergencies. She's still paying close attention to the ongoing Flint water crisis, as the Michigan Red Cross contributed to the relief efforts there.

### Positive Attitudes

In recent years, the Red Cross has cut back on its paid staff, and is turning to more volunteers, said Linda Kaminski of Portage, who is a part-time receptionist for the Red Cross of Southwest Michigan. Paid or not, everyone involved with the Red Cross is there because they want to help.

"They have a good, positive attitude that rubbed off on the rest of us," she said.

Kaminski said the part she's enjoyed most, after four years of volunteering, is meeting people — other volunteers, and the community members the Red Cross helps. "We take veterans to the (Veterans Administration) offices for their appointments," she said. "I work on blood donations at schools, and I like talking to the kids — when they get off their phones."



You can see more of Andrew Domino's writing at [www.dominowriting.com](http://www.dominowriting.com)

# 100

## A Century of Service

Take a look at some of the accomplishments of the Red Cross of Southwest Michigan

The Kalamazoo Rotary Club founds a local unit of the Red Cross during World War I.

1917

1930s

Red Cross units across the U.S. help with food distribution to the poor and hungry.

The Red Cross assists thousands of Vietnamese refugees settle in the U.S., including west Michigan.

1975

1980

The Red Cross helps after a tornado touches down in central Kalamazoo.

Major flooding in St. Joseph County calls for assistance from the Red Cross.

1989

1991

The Kalamazoo Co. Red Cross mobile health clinic helps families across the region for more than a decade.

Another tornado, this time in Cass County, damages a migrant worker camp, among other locations.

1992

2005

SW Michigan's Red Cross units support about 1,000 people evacuated from New Orleans to Fort Custer, near Battle Creek, after Hurricane Katrina.

The American Red Cross of Southwest Michigan marks its 100th anniversary.

2017

### WHO IS THE AMERICAN RED CROSS?

- The American Red Cross is the nation's oldest humanitarian service organization.
- The Red Cross of Southwest Michigan has the only FREE transportation program for veterans in Kalamazoo County to and from the Veteran's Administration for their doctor appointments.
- The Red Cross is the only organization cleared by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to reach out to active military men and women.
- Volunteers constitute about 90 percent of the American Red Cross workforce.
- The Red Cross does not discriminate, and remains neutral in the face of disaster when assisting victims affected by disasters.