

Growing a better Athens

R.E.M: The impact

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Mike Mills, left, Michael Stipe, and Peter Buck of R.E.M. performed on the steps of the Athens-Clarke County Courthouse in October 2000 as part of the Land Aid Exhibition, an event held by the Athens Grow Green Coalition to raise awareness of environmental issues in Athens and surrounding areas.

By Julie Phillips | julie.phillips@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 4:16 AM on Sunday, September 10, 2006

In a famous scene etched in scratchy black and white film, a desperate man runs down the snow-covered streets of a seedy Bedford Falls, suddenly aware of the impact his one "Wonderful Life" has had on an entire town.

Maybe it's a little melodramatic to make a comparison, but ask around in our sunny town of Athens about the impact of a certain band, and the response is unanimous. Athens wouldn't be what it is today without R.E.M.

It's easy to point to concrete examples of R.E.M.'s impact: historic homes in in-town neighborhoods; businesses with unique character, such as The Grit and Go Bar, thriving in buildings owned or once-owned by band members; downtown clubs filled with people and pulsating with musicians who readily name R.E.M. as an influence (see Pages E3, E8).

R.E.M.'s impact on peoples' lives is a more difficult one to quantify. But with the financial support supplied by the band for organizations in need, Athens residents have found everything from a shelter for the night to a new basketball uniform at the Boys and Girls Club.

"There's been no entity more broadly supportive of the community than R.E.M.," says Tim Johnson, executive director of Family Connection/Communities In Schools of Athens. "I can't think of any nonprofit I know of that they haven't had some impact on."

"They've helped with scores of social service organizations, environmental organizations, education-related organizations - so many have benefited directly from their stewardship," adds Laurie Fowler, Environmental Law Practicum Director and Public Service Outreach Director in the University of Georgia's Institute of Ecology. "And their influence can be seen in the built environment, architecturally, with a number of buildings that have been preserved, and with the cultural richness of the town through film and music."

"Their getting involved has helped people in the community understand the issues," says Nancy Stangle, development director of Athens Land Trust.

As the first president of the Nancy Travis House in Athens, which provides child care assistance for homeless families, June Ball remembers how R.E.M. helped the agency get started.

"We didn't know where to get the money, and they funded it in its entirety, giving us the money to open the doors. ... And there are so many organizations they've done that for, all over town," Ball says.

"Historically, we've written to them when we were in a pinch," adds Courtney Davis, executive director of the Athens Area Homeless Shelter. "And they've always responded. I've been struck

by their continued commitment to Athens - they don't have to do what they've done at all, but they have."

"They've been an incredible help to us," says Derrick Floyd, director of operations at the Boys and Girls Club of Athens, adding the band's support has helped provide uniforms for the club's basketball leagues. "And it goes a long way - to give kids the opportunity to be able to get things they might not otherwise have." Floyd says R.E.M.'s name is on the uniforms and when people ask about it and find out, "They say 'Wow!'" "We appreciate the help they've given us, and their friendship."

"The great thing about R.E.M. is they've always insisted on complete integrity with their music ... and as a member of this community, they've held that same integrity," says Johnson. "They are real citizens of Athens, the country - and the planet. They're incredibly talented, but they're also good people, too."

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