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"Community Capitalist," August 7, 2008

And the good news is . . .

By Ron Kitchens
Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Michigan First

Last Sunday I woke to read a very nice editorial in the Grand Rapids Press that talked of all the new jobs coming to the Kalamazoo region.

On Monday I woke to a feature story about the region and all the new jobs announced.

On Tuesday, while driving around the region, I saw multiple billboards by Adams Outdoor that talk of all the jobs coming here.

On Thursday, I spent part of the evening with community leaders in Mattawan discussing all of the new jobs coming to the region.

With all this good press it would be easy to believe that all was well, that we are on easy street. Easy to believe but not the whole picture.

The truth is we do have good things coming in the future but we still have many in our community that need our help now.

For the past three years I have had the privilege to serve on the campaign committee for the Kalamazoo County United Way. I was asked this week why I am so committed to the United Way. That's an easy question, because I know firsthand what it is like to need the services provided by the United Way.

I know what it is like to have cupboards empty and a basket of food show up on your porch. Last year the United Way agencies served 100,684 meals to hungry individuals in Kalamazoo County. So I guess a lot of other people know this need as well.

I know what it is like to need medical attention and not have insurance or money to pay for it. Last year the United Way agencies served 3,500 people in Kalamazoo County with their health care needs.

I have looked into the face of a family member who needs counseling but could not afford it. Last year in Kalamazoo County the United Way agencies helped nearly 5,000 local residents find the counseling they needed.

I know what it is like to be homeless or nearly there and the despair that is felt. Last year in Kalamazoo County the United Way Agencies helped 1531 families find and keep shelter.

In this day of \$4-a-gallon gas and escalating food and utility costs, many are being forced to make the decision of whether to buy gas and keep their jobs or buy food for their kids.

We have always been a nation, region and community that has taken care of those who need a hand up. I implore you to not be the person who almost helped your neighbor. Don't be the person who thought about giving their fair share to the United Way but just never got around to it.

As you look into the face of your children, imagine a world where you could not afford to feed them, where their illnesses go untreated, where a warm coat and shelter from the storm are not givens.

Imagine what you can do for the child of another with just a few dollars each week from your paycheck. Make the difference today that you hope to see in the world. Become United.

Ron Kitchens, RonKitchens.com, is CEO of Southwest Michigan First and general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Fund. He is the author of the recently released book "Community Capitalism: Lessons from Kalamazoo and Beyond," and a frequent speaker on economic growth. Read "The Community Capitalist" blog from Kitchens and Southwest Michigan First at mlive.com/business.