

## Awards

From A12

this program has donated over 900 handknit and/or crocheted hats to people in need. Wildskeins has provided knitting lessons for Hickory Public Library and participated in the CVQA Quilt Show. The shop promotes Knit In Public Day each June to showcase the craft of knitting to the community. Wildskeins has donated yarn and supplies to Hickory High School's art classes and local retirement centers. Wildskeins supports TwinKnits in its Hat Not Hate program with yarn donations. Wildskeins offers a 10% discount to anyone involved in a prayer shawl ministry and has donated finished blankets to the Pregnancy Care Center for distribution to young mothers. Wildskeins is a member of the National Needle Arts Association (TNNA).

### Business and/or Organization (11 to 50 employees)

#### ■ Hickory Mechanical

Hickory Mechanical, Inc. was founded in March 1985 by David Moore, a third-generation mechanical contractor. Hickory Mechanical provides piping, plumbing, and HVAC services to industrial and institutional customers in the Hickory area. The company strives to be a full-service provider in all areas of its expertise and to facilitate other work when needed. With many certified medical gas technicians on staff, Hickory Mechanical has completed extensive work at medical facilities. The company has also helped with total building renovations for new companies coming into town.

Hickory Mechanical values repeat business and looks for customers, not jobs. The company has experienced extensive growth over the last two to three years, growing from about 15 employees to 36, plus an additional 12 subcontracted labor individuals. The company purchased and upgraded a vacant building along the Hickory Trail for its business operations and intends to continue investing in Hickory. Revenue for the business is on pace to nearly triple the average for the previous five years. Hickory Mechanical has also expanded into several new industries.

Beyond its professional services, Hickory Mechanical is committed to furthering the local economy through its involvement in various organizations and nonprofits. Hickory Mechanical is a gold partner of The Chamber of Catawba County and a sustaining member of the Catawba County Economic Development Corporation's Committee of 100, which supports economic growth and industry recruitment in Catawba County. Hickory Mechanical employees hold leadership positions within the Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, work with and support many arts programs, and volunteer in varying capacities. Hickory Mechanical provides financial support to a dozen or more local nonprofits and holds season tickets to Hickory Crawdads for donation and employee use. Hickory Mechanical regularly participates in Catawba Valley Community College's Construction Academy and holds a position on the Hickory Public Schools CTE Advisory Committee. The company is also a member of the Lenoir-Rhyne University President Society and Business Council, and holds a position on the College of Business and Economics Advisory Board.

### Business and/or Organization (51 or more employees)

#### ■ Alex Lee, Inc.

Founded in 1931 and headquartered in Hickory, Alex Lee is a family owned and operated company that employs approximately 15,000 people. It serves as the parent company of Merchants Distributors, LLC, which provides full-service, wholesale distribution to supermarkets; Souto Foods, a distributor of authentic Hispanic foods; and Import Mex, a distributor of Mexican and Central American products. Alex Lee is also the parent company of Lowes Foods, which includes nearly 85 full-service grocery stores in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. In addition, Alex Lee, Inc. is the parent company of W. Lee Flowers & Company, which operates approximately 60 IGA and KJ's Market grocery stores and provides wholesale distribution to supermarkets.

Alex Lee is expanding its Hickory distribution center capacity with an addition of 200,000



SUBMITTED PHOTO

City of Hickory Business and Community Development Manager Dave Leonetti, left, presents award to Leroy Kennedy.

square feet of automated ambient warehouse space and the conversion of additional space to perishable warehouse space. In 2023, Alex Lee acquired a company in Florida, Import Mex, which expands its distribution area and variety of products. Shared services for the new distribution center are supported out of Hickory.

Alex Lee and its subsidiaries are heavily involved in the Hickory community. The company supports local nonprofits like the SALT Block Foundation, United Arts Council, Catawba Science Center, Hickory Museum of Art, Hickory Choral Society, Western Piedmont Symphony, Second Harvest Food Bank, Hickory Soup Kitchen, Sipes Orchard Home, Carolina Caring, Habitat for Humanity, Exodus, YMCA, and others. Lowes Foods sponsors the City of Hickory's annual Christmas parade. Alex Lee also supports education foundations and programs like the K-64 initiative, as well as the area's educational institutions, which include Catawba Valley Community College, Lenoir-Rhyne University, and Appalachian State University in Hickory.

#### ■ Home Instead

John and Joan Coffey own two Home Instead franchises in North Carolina with their corporate headquarters in Hickory. Home Instead provides home care services, including personal care, respite care, and companionship to older adults within the context of their home. Simply put, Home Instead provides an alternative for older adults to safely live at home in their retirement. The Coffeys purchased the Hickory Home Instead franchise in August 2019, when it employed 38 people. The franchise has since grown its employee base organically by 268% in this business. Over this time, employee wages have increased by 65-85%, depending upon job classification. The acquisition of the Asheville Home Instead franchise further added to the growth of the company, which now employs 196 active employees with 103 living and working within the Hickory Metro.

Home Instead offices are located in the Fidelity Professional Building at 27 First Ave. NE in downtown Hickory. In 2020, the company partnered with the building owner and completed significant leasehold improvements to modernize the top floor of this office building to include modern offices, an auditorium that will seat 49 people, and a professional conference room with views of downtown. The building owner

has continued the revitalization of the Fidelity Professional Building, and it is now a comfortable space for companies desiring modern office space in the central business district of Hickory.

The company and its employees also give back to the community through charitable programs, volunteering, membership in civic and professional organizations, and workforce development initiatives. Home Instead established and continues to conduct the "Be a Santa to a Senior" program, which coordinates the collection and giving of gifts to senior adults at Christmas who would otherwise not receive a gift during the holiday season. Recipients include 150 to 250 older adults who are part of retirement or skilled nursing homes, and are not Home Instead clients. Each year, 1,500 to 2,500 gifts are collected, purchased, and distributed to these individuals by Home Instead office staff employees.

#### ■ Martin Starnes & Associates, CPAs, PA

Established in 1987, Martin Starnes & Associates, CPAs, P.A. (MSA) is a professional accounting and consulting firm. The company has established a reputation for excellence in the fields of tax, auditing, and consulting for both business and private sectors. The firm's mission is not just to deliver top-notch accounting services, but to cultivate long-lasting relationships with clients, serving as trusted advisers who help navigate the complexities of financial decision-making. Always placing the needs of clients at the forefront, MSA embodies integrity, professionalism, and a dedication to fostering the financial health and success of those it serves.

MSA plays an instrumental role in promoting economic development. Through its expertise, financial management, and business consulting for numerous local business clients, the firm provides services to help clients manage their finances, meet regulatory requirements, and strategize for future growth. By offering these essential services, MSA empowers clients to thrive, create jobs, and contribute to the city's tax base. MSA has been fortunate to grow 25% over the past two years and looks to grow at least 10% in 2023. In response to this growth, the firm has increased the number of employees, thereby bringing high-paying professional jobs to the area.

MSA innovates to capitalize on new technologies, invests in continuous education and training to ensure that its professionals stay

ahead of regulatory changes and industry shifts, and encourages community involvement. Giving back to the community is one of the firm's top initiatives. From Chamber membership and activities to serving on local boards, volunteering at local shelters and supporting wellness initiatives, to the firm's own Volunteer 360 event, MSA is driven to give assistance wherever needed. Martin Starnes is also a founding sponsor and strong supporter of the Hickory Young Professionals Association.

### Nonprofit

#### ■ Exodus Homes and Exodus Works

Exodus Homes provides 73 beds of faith-based supportive housing for homeless people returning to the community from treatment centers and prison with a comprehensive array of services to help them learn a new way to live and become productive citizens of the community.

Exodus serves an average of 160 people a year in the housing program. Exodus Works is a revenue generating vocational training program that provides volunteer work opportunities for Exodus residents in the areas of residential and commercial moving, landscaping, debris removal, general labor, shuttle services, event management, and temporary to permanent labor in the organization's five corporate partners - Vanguard Furniture, Sherrill Furniture, Design Foundry, Hickory Springs, and The Taiji Group. The goal of Exodus Works is to generate revenue to support Exodus Homes and to help its residents become employed full-time in the community in jobs that pay a living wage. The net profit of Exodus Works is the primary source of funding for Exodus Homes.

Exodus Works provides volunteer work opportunities for its residents in a variety of enterprises to create a sustainable employment track that is not dependent on just one or two revenue generating services. Having a variety of training enterprises including temp-to-perm placements with its corporate partners gives Exodus residents more options for full-time employment. When Exodus residents become employed in the community, they become tax paying citizens, increasing the tax base and the amount of disposable income spent in the community, which helps other businesses prosper and grow. When homeless people learn a new way to live after addiction or

incarceration and are employed full-time, they become an asset in the community and not a liability. They can pay their child support, probation fees, restitution fees, and reach their goals, such as getting their driver's license back and purchasing reliable transportation for work after they leave the program.

By creating a successful path to employment with a proven track record of getting Exodus residents employed full-time in the Hickory community, Exodus Homes and Exodus Works are reducing prison recidivism, reducing neighborhood crime, increasing the tax base, stabilizing the whole community, and improving the quality of life for Exodus participants and their families.

In recent years, Exodus has experienced impressive growth in annual sales and net profit figures. The company is on track to well surpass its sales projections and goals for 2023. In 2022, with the help of the Bolick Foundation and the George Foundation, Exodus purchased a 10,000-pound dump trailer and an F-250 truck to haul it. This led to a significant increase in the size and frequency of clean out and debris removal jobs. Another factor that has contributed to the continued financial growth of the company is the increased diversification of services offered by Exodus Works. This year, Exodus extended its offerings to include shuttle services in partnership with the Hickory Metro Convention Center, churches, and other businesses. As Exodus Works continues to grow, Exodus Homes plans to expand bed capacity to serve more people. The need for supportive housing for those returning from treatment centers and prison is urgent and Exodus continues to partner with local businesses, recovery groups, and individuals to help those who need it.

"The Business Development Committee is proud to honor these nine award winners for their commitment and support of the city's vision for economic vitality," said Grace McLaurin, chair of the BDC.

The 2023 Business Well Crafted Award winners will be featured in a series of videos shared over the next few months.

For more information about the Business Development Committee and its Business Well Crafted Awards, contact City of Hickory Business and Community Development Manager Dave Leonetti at 828-261-2227 or dleonetti@hickorync.gov.