



A local group promotes eye health while serving the community.

BY EMILY MCINTYRE | PHOTOS BY JILLY BURNS

Rewind to 2013 when Mike Harrington and his wife, Tina — both Ohio University graduates — packed up their home in Midland, Michigan, and moved back to where they were born and raised: Athens, Ohio. They wanted to be closer to their parents and become involved in the community they called home. As they unpacked their collection of boxes and belongings, Harrington came across several pairs of old eyeglasses.

In search of a way to recycle them, he reached out to the Athens Lions Club and made contact with Tim Hartman, who was serving as the club's president at the time. After notifying Harrington that Athens had a number of drop box locations for eyeglasses throughout the city, Hartman extended a special offer.

"He said, 'As a matter of fact, we're meeting this Tuesday and we're always looking for new members,'" Harrington recalls. "He asked if I'd be interested to come and [said] he'd buy my dinner."

The Athens Lions Club is a chapter of Lions Club International, which is the largest service club organization in the world with more than 1.4 million members in over 46,000 chapters.

Through primarily providing eye exams and eyeglasses for people who can't afford them, the club supports the blind and visually impaired by promoting good eye health. The local organization also participates in a variety of other activities and events such as the Special Olympics in the early spring, roadside pickup along Route 682, and assistance with the Athens Fourth of July parade.

The chapter was chartered in 1946 when a group of business-

people from a Lions Club in Wellston, Ohio, came to Athens to recruit more members. Athens Lions Club President Larry Ball explains that in those days, Court Street was a hot spot for retail and other businesses; thus, many founding members decided it would be wise to start a chapter here in Athens.

Though the club is active today, it has suffered quite a decline in membership over the past few decades as former members have grown much older and less mobile. The ability and willingness to commit to social organizations such as the Athens Lions Club have taken a plunge in recent years as well, which is a top concern for Harrington, Hartman and Ball.

"When I first joined 38 years ago, we had over 50 members. Because people were retiring, dying and moving on, we're now down to 21," Hartman says. "Our youngest member is 40 and our oldest member is 85. Young people just don't seem to want to join organizations."

At only 21 members strong, the Athens Lions Club hasn't let its low numbers get in the way of its passion for serving the Athens community. The group meets the first and third Tuesdays of every month at 6:30 p.m. in the WillowView Cafe of OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital. Harrington does his best to arrange for a guest speaker to come on those evenings, and the club reviews its agenda of upcoming events and local activities.

Last fall, the club worked with art teacher Dana Dieterle at Athens Middle School to sponsor the Lions International Peace Poster Contest. The state chapter of the Lions of Ohio also developed a program last summer in which volunteers from the Athens Lions Club, the Alexander Lions Club and the Plains

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Lions Club helped perform vision pre-screenings at Chauncey Preschool in Chauncey, Ohio. Each volunteer learned how to work the equipment and check the vision of preschoolers.

"That was a lot of fun. We got to interact with the children, and there's a series of activities we do to gauge their vision," Harrington says. "We look at their depth perception and things like that, then the machine looks and records the spectrum of their vision and it prints it out."

Once screening results are produced, the school nurse can make a referral to the parents of a child who may need to see an ophthalmologist for further examination. If that child comes from a low-income family and needs glasses, Harrington says the club could provide funding for that pair of glasses or the eye exam itself. Vision pre-screenings are something that the club wants to continue doing every year in both the fall and spring as an effort to maintain its international commitment to promoting good eye health.

This year, the club also wrote a check for \$750 for the Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) at each of the four Athens elementary schools to go toward student activities as needed. Fi-

nance is a large component of the social group, so the members work hard to keep track of every dollar that comes their way.

Each member pays \$60 in district and international club dues for the whole year and receives subscription to the international LION Magazine. Usually, the Athens Lions Club does the majority of its fundraising in the summer at the Athens County Fair, where it runs the food booth near the grandstand. Its sloppy joe sandwiches are always a hit, thanks to the recipe from Rich Neumann, club treasurer and director of Culinary Services. Past fundraising efforts include rummage sales, craft shows during Moms Weekend, and door-to-door product sales.

The club is currently part of Ohio's District 13-K Lions Club, but this year, it will be transitioning into District OH-7. The region is undergoing a redistricting process in order to meet the minimum 1,250 members-per-district requirement, which is listed in the International Constitution.

"Over the last 10 years, we have had seven districts that have dropped below that number. So we're going from 11 districts down to seven in the state of Ohio," Hartman says.

For an organization that has faced some major changes, the Athens Lions Club hasn't drifted from the international motto that keeps it going: "we serve."

"Obviously helping people out to the best of our ability is top priority. It's a fun time to talk to people and listen to guest speakers and enjoy the camaraderie," Hartman says. "That's not quite as important as serving the community, but it keeps you wanting to go to every meeting and staying involved." **b**



LIONS CLUBS IN ATHENS COUNTY

- Alexander Lions Club
- Athens Lions Club
- The Plains Lions Club
- Chauncey-Dover Lions Club
- Nelsonville Lions Club
- Trimble Lions Club
- Coolville Lions Club

