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'True Gris Awards' for the year

By ED GRISAMORE - gris@macon.com

once displayed a sign above my desk: "Should trees die for this?"

It was a reminder about the economy of words. Make every noun count. Be resourceful with the adjectives. Don't go heavy on the adverbs.



Julie Hadden

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But it is the people and the stories behind those words who matter most. Auto mechanics. Librarians. Church secretaries. College professors. Nurses. Bankers. Aspiring songwriters. Homemakers. Caregivers. Beauty queens.

They often thank me for writing about them.

I thank them for sharing their stories.

Some rise to the top. Their lives are wrapped in their own special paper, with a bright bow.

They have done something extraordinary. They rise to meet a challenge. They overcome adversity. They reach to help someone in need. They provide an inspiration. They are a point of light.

I always reserve a few plaudits at the end of the year and bring them back on stage for another bow.

Here are my dozen "True Gris Awards" for 2011.

PHILLIP MANN: The former deputy sheriff has been a hero in this town in the 35 years since he was shot in the line of duty and paralyzed. In September, the Kiwanis Club of Macon gave him the Distinguished Service to Children Award for his volunteer work with Vineville Academy, the Georgia Academy for the Blind, Special Olympics and as a Sunday School teacher at Ingleside Baptist Church.

TRENT AND LABRINA SOLOMON: After their 4-year-old son, Joshua, died of an inoperable brain tumor, the Solomons created a foundation called "Joshua's Wish" to raise money and increase awareness of childhood cancer research.

MACK BUTLER: He was a veterinarian for 56 years in Macon before retiring last summer. Thousands of dogs and cats, and even an occasional parakeet and chimpanzee owe the good doctor a debt of gratitude. He once made house calls to the famous Budweiser Clydesdale horses and to Silver, the trusted horse of the Lone Ranger.

JULIE HADDEN: She was a winner when she was named runner-up for "The Biggest Loser" in 2007. Now living in Macon, where her husband is on the staff at Mabel White Baptist Church, Julie gives inspirational speeches all over the country about losing 97 pounds on the show. She later appeared on Oprah and Larry King, and wrote a book called: "Fat Chance: Losing the Weight, Gaining My Worth."

GENE ESPY: He has always been one of my favorite trailblazers, and it was a thrill to see him honored in his hometown. He was recognized by the Exchange Club of Macon for the 60th anniversary of his becoming only the second through-hiker in history to walk the entire Appalachian Trail. The mayor's office followed with a proclamation, making Sept. 30 "Gene Espy Day" in Macon. He has also written a book, called "The Trail of My Life."

HATTIE O'BRYANT: She retired in March after serving as a OB/GYN nurse for 60 years. Although she never had children of her own, she was the "mother hen" of local labor and delivery rooms, watching thousands of Macon babies draw their first breaths of sweet air.

PACE TYSON: The senior from West Laurens High School in Dublin founded an organization called "Soldier On" to help provide homeless veterans with furniture, appliances, clothing, blankets, linens, household goods and personal hygiene products. In March, he was named Youth of the Year for Dublin's annual St. Patrick's Day Festival. He was selected as Youth of the Month for an issue of "Amazing Kids" magazine. In November, he received a shout-out on the "John Boy and Billy" nationally syndicated radio show.

SHIRLEY MAY: An amazing lady and remarkably gifted volunteer. She has been a tireless cheerleader for various senior groups and civic organizations, as well as an enthusiastic supporter of local community theater. Macon could use a bunch more just like her.

THAD CHILDS: He is a local banker who lives in Gray and the iron man of running enthusiasts in Middle Georgia. His feat of feet inspires more than just runners. He has not missed a day of running since March 5, 1979. That's 32 years and 301 days of dedication and a distance of more than 3.5 times around the globe.

CHARLES GLOVER: He grew up in an era when black golfers were not allowed to play on the local public course. Now Charles teaches inner-city kids how to swing a 5-iron and line up a putt through the Macon Golf for Kids program at Bowden Golf Course.

PAIGE SLOCUMB: After spending years as a special education teacher, Paige serves as a certified instructor of self-defense classes for women. She calls the classes "Fight Like a Girl" and offers them to groups free of charge in honor of her sister, Jennifer Ewing, who was sexually assaulted and murdered.

JIMMY HALL: When his wife, Sandra, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at the young age of 53, he became her caregiver for the next 10 years. Following her death in 2006, he went on a personal mission to raise money and local awareness of what has become the sixth-leading cause of death in the U.S.

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