

for 37 years, *the washingtonian* has honored men and women who give their time and talent to make this a better place for all of us. here are 2008's

## washingtonians of the year

by leslie milk and ellen ryan  
photographs by matthew worden

### **linda mathes »**

It is the so-called little disasters that keep Linda Mathes up nights. As CEO of the American Red Cross of the National Capital Area, Mathes gets the call when a five-alarm fire in DC's Mount Pleasant leaves 48 families in need of immediate help. "I'll get a page; our teams are deployed. We get there within an hour, two at most," Mathes says.

In Mount Pleasant, Mathes's people set up a reception area for displaced families. While Red Cross volunteers ensured that everybody had a place to stay that night, others staffed a canteen for residents, firefighters, and police.

That same night, another Red Cross disaster team was dispatched to Silver Spring, where a fire had displaced eight families.

Then there are the big disasters. The area Red Cross also sent teams to help after Katrina hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

The local Red Cross responds to two or three local disasters a day. Assistance is always free, even if victims need days to find their footing. Mathes relies on 3,000 volunteers to bolster her nearly 100 paid staff. She also counts on 100,000 more Washingtonians who have received Red Cross emergency training.

That training came in handy when a woman got hurt on a DC bike trail. A crowd had gathered, but nobody knew what to do until someone with Red Cross training happened by. Another alum administered CPR to an infant born in a parking lot.

Mathes never expected to be a Red Cross lifer. More than 35 years ago, she decided to leave her native Memphis to go somewhere she'd never been. She was offered a job in Dallas running a Red Cross program for kids and has been with the organization ever since.

In 1991, Mathes became local Red Cross CEO. She also cochairs the Emergency Preparedness Task Force of Greater Washington.

The Red Cross headquarters in Fairfax has a "disaster room" ready at all times with hundreds of cots, ready-to-eat meals, and other supplies. But most of all it has Linda Mathes, a human dynamo who would make Clara Barton proud. "I'm fueled by the energy of the people who come together under that emblem—the Red Cross," she says.

