

Thanks for making our lives better

We've met some incredible people in this space this year — people who opened their lives to us and touched our minds and hearts with their stories.

They're not movie stars or sports heroes. You won't find their names up on any movie marquee or billboard on Sunset Boulevard.

You will find them living down the street or around the corner. They're your neighbors.



DENNIS MCCARTHY

We met Chris Cleaver of Thousand Oaks, an Army medic who reminded us the fighting is not over for our young servicemen and

women returning home to a life of uncertainty.

"You're out on a job interview and they're asking you questions and opinions on this and that. You may have the skills, but the answers aren't coming," said Cleaver, 26, who served two tours of duty in Iraq.

"You've been gone a long time fighting a war, not looking for a job. That was our job. A lot of my buddies have found it really hard to get back to life — really hard.

"They don't know what's out there for them. They've been gone a long time and need someone to help them."

His words are like a slap across the nation's face. Why aren't we helping our returning vets get more decent jobs when they come home? Who deserves them more?

We met Bob Mikolasko and his faithful dog, Kaiser, who lifted our hearts and spirits with their poignant love story.

The 56-year-old homeless Vietnam vet left his 16-year-old best pal lying sick on the steps of Chatoak Pet Medical Center in Granada Hills late one night with a scribbled handwritten letter next to him.

"Dear Dr's — Please forgive me. I've nowhere to turn so I ask you to mercifully, gently, and lovingly, please help him sleep.

"He's been my friend, my teacher, my pupil, my lifelong loving and loyal companion since he was 8 months old. He had a stroke, and won't drink water or eat food. I know when



Chris Cleaver, photographed in Iraq visiting a woman and her son, is now going to nursing school.

it's time to say goodbye to a friend."

The staff at Chatoak worked hard to make sure it wasn't time to say goodbye, and Kaiser recovered from his stroke. A week later a buddy reading the Daily News told Bob to pick up the paper. Kaiser was on the front page.

"I just stood there in the street reading the story, bawling my eyes out," he said. "Then I went to bring Kaiser home."

We met the MacKellar and Stephenson, four generations of teachers at Saugus High School — from 89-year-old grandma Angagh MacKellar teaching French part time, down to her grandson Marc Stephenson, a fourth-year science teacher.

His mom, Patty, has also taught French at the school for 20 years, and his dad, Jenk, taught English for 30 years.

Anyone want to talk about some teachers not being devoted to their trade?

We met so many people — from kids to seniors — stepping forward to help people in their community for no other reason than it was the right thing to do.

It's a rich tradition. Kids recycling or setting up corner lemonade stands to help fund cancer research for kids undergoing therapy at Los Angeles Childrens Hospital and others.

Seniors volunteering their time and expertise because, really, how long can a person sit home reading a book or watching TV before going nuts? How many retirement cruises are enough?



Four generations of teachers at Saugus High School are, from left, Patty Stephenson; Angagh MacKellar, who returned to teaching; Marc Stephenson; and Jenk Stephenson, who recently retired.



Tina Burch/Staff Photographer
Bob Mikolasko hugs his dog, Kaiser, after picking him up at a veterinary clinic.

We met Dr. Eugene Gettelman turning 100, still making rounds every Friday morning at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, and until this year, at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center every Thursday.

"I think it's a shame the way the telephone is answered by an exchange today, and they tell you if your child is sick take them to an emergency room," Dr. Gettelman said.

"That's absolutely against my principles. If a child is sick, I'm going to see him. I don't care what day or time it is."

Ah, Dr. Gettelman, I wish you could give us another 100 years. We met Jessyca Avalos, a field deputy for Los Angeles City Councilman Richard Alarcón,

taking 18-year-old Polytechnic High School senior Jamie Aparicio to her prom night this year.

Jamie was born with Morquio syndrome, a rare hereditary disorder of bone development that results in severe malformation of the skeleton.

Jessyca had never seen so much energy and life packed into a body only 3 feet tall. When she learned Jamie's parents couldn't afford to send her to the prom, and that no one had asked her, Jessyca asked what time she wanted to be picked up.

Jamie was going to the prom dressed to the nines, first class, and Jessyca, 25, was paying the tab and accompanying her.

Yeah, the younger generation is really messed up sometimes, isn't it?

And we met Sylvia Valenzuela and Norma Pintero doing what most of us wanted to do after the devastating rash of fires this year.

Make sure every tired, worn-out firefighter they could reach got a pizza, something to drink and a big thank-you for the homes and lives they saved.

I wish I had the space to thank everyone we met here this year — all the people who made our communities better places to live.

They all deserve our thanks this Thanksgiving. Have a great day.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. dennis.mccarthy@dailynews.com, 818-713-3749