

Association Executives of North Carolina

Success *Live*

BY ASSOCIATION

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July 15, 2026

You May Never Know

Recently, I read a reflection by author Ralph Marston that struck a chord with me. His message was simple: while it's important to stay informed about the larger world around us, our greatest impact is often much closer to home.

As I thought about his words, I found myself reflecting on the countless people I've met throughout nearly five decades as an artist. Over the years, I've had the privilege of hearing remarkable stories of service, leadership, generosity, and perseverance. What fascinates me most is that many of the individuals who made the greatest difference never fully realized the impact they were having at the time.

We live in a culture that often celebrates large accomplishments and highly visible successes. It's easy to assume that significance is measured by the size of the audience, the scale of the project, or the recognition that follows. Yet some of the most meaningful changes in people's lives begin with something much smaller: a conversation, an introduction, an encouraging word, or an opportunity offered at just the right moment.

Association professionals understand this better than most.

Every year, associations create opportunities that influence careers, strengthen professions, and improve communities. A scholarship helps a student pursue a dream. A conference session sparks a new idea. A volunteer discovers leadership abilities they didn't know they possessed. A member makes a connection that changes the trajectory of a career. These moments rarely make headlines, yet their impact can extend for years, sometimes generations.

What makes associations so powerful is that their influence is multiplied through people. Every program, event, committee, and initiative exists because someone chose to invest their time, talent, and energy in helping others succeed. While budgets, attendance numbers, and strategic plans are important measures of success, the true value of an association is often found in the lives it touches.

Yet when I look back over nearly five decades as an artist, philanthropist, and business owner, I've discovered that meaningful change rarely begins with grand gestures. More often, it begins quietly.

Someone notices a need.

Someone offers encouragement.

Someone decides to volunteer.

Someone chooses to help.

At the time, those actions may seem small. Yet they often become the starting point for something much larger than anyone could have imagined.

Throughout my career, I have learned that meaningful difference-making rarely begins with abundant resources or perfect conditions. More often, it begins when someone notices a need and decides to act. They don't wait until they have all the answers. They simply use what they have, where they are, to help move something forward.

That principle reminds me of a quote I have carried with me for many years: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

Simple words, yet they capture a profound truth.

Most of us will never change the entire world. However, each of us has the opportunity to influence the people, organizations, and communities within our reach.

The challenge is that we rarely get to see the full ripple effect of our efforts. We may never know how a scholarship changed someone's future. We may never hear how a volunteer opportunity helped build a leader's confidence. We may never learn that a conversation we considered ordinary became a turning point in another person's life.

Yet those unseen outcomes are often the very reason our work matters.

As we prepare to gather for the AENC Annual Meeting, I hope you'll take a moment to reflect on the lives you've touched along the way. Association professionals spend so much time looking ahead to the next meeting, the next challenge, and the next initiative that they rarely pause to consider the difference they've already made.

Think about it for a moment.

Who have you encouraged?

Who have you helped?

What opportunities have you created for others?

Perhaps a young professional found a mentor because of a program you helped create. Perhaps a scholarship recipient discovered a career path because someone like you believed in their potential. Perhaps a volunteer stepped into leadership because you offered an opportunity at just the right time.

You may never know the full impact of those moments. Then again, that's often how meaningful influence works.

The difference you make is frequently far greater than the difference you can see. And sometimes, the most important impact you'll ever have is one you'll never fully know.

HEAR MORE FROM BILL MANGUM AT THE UPCOMING 2026 AENC ANNUAL MEETING, 3:00PM, MONDAY, JULY 27TH, 2026, in Concord, NC. [DETAILS & REGISTER HERE.](#)

[About the Author](#)

William Mangum is a North Carolina artist, author, philanthropist, and keynote speaker whose work has inspired audiences for nearly five decades. Best known for his paintings celebrating the landscapes and landmarks of North Carolina, William has also dedicated much of his career to philanthropy, helping raise millions of dollars for charitable causes through art. Through stories of leadership, creativity, and service, he encourages individuals and organizations to recognize opportunities, embrace resourcefulness, and make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. William will serve as the keynote speaker for the 2026 AENC Annual Meeting.

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