Dr. Norma Desjardins and her husband Paul’s Community Action story began in the small Aroostook County town of Van Buren nearly 50 years ago when the two attended the very first years of the Head Start program. Now, decades later, their story continues with the realization of their dream to offer dental care to children from all income situations in their rural County community.

On May 18, Community Action leaders from around Northern New England welcomed the Desjardins to their annual Community Action Conference at Sunday River to honor the couple as Maine Stars of Community Action.

“It was a tremendous honor and pleasure to pay tribute to such a wonderful couple who have had such a profound impact on the lives of so many Aroostook County Families,” said Aroostook County Action Program Executive Director/CEO Jason Parent. “Paul and Norma Desjardins truly embody the spirit and essence of Community Action. Their dream to establish a pediatric dental clinic to serve all residents of our region and the resulting efforts to bring it to life are most worthy of celebrating. Their selection as the State of Maine’s 'Star of Community Action' award recipients for 2017 is a tribute to their vision, hard work, and partnership and support of our County community.”

Tufts University, where she received her dental degree in 1992, has hailed Dr. Desjardins “Maine’s Tooth Fairy.” Upon finishing school, the Desjardins set up practice in their hometown of Van Buren, bringing comprehensive dentistry to the community as a way of giving back to the 2,500 residents who were otherwise without local dental care.

The Desjardins eventually moved their growing family to Presque Isle where they found a way to give back to ACAP, the parent organization of Head Start where the couple’s community action roots first sprouted. Norma served as the Head Start Dental advisor and the dental representative on ACAP’s Health Advisory Board. Norma also provided support to ACAP’s Oral Health Program by serving as dental supervisor for the Agency’s Dental Hygienist. She continues to serve in both capacities today.

Given their early connections to the work of Community Action, it may be unsurprising that when Norma and her husband recognized a great need for low-cost pediatric dental services for children and young families of northernmost Maine, their dream of opening the Saint Apollonia Dental Clinic was born. Aptly named after the patron saint of dentistry, the clinic is now a thriving practice serving thousands of patients, most of which are low-income and would not otherwise have access to dental care.

The Desjardins were aware for many years that children with MaineCare had limited or no dental service since many providers did not accept MaineCare payments.
Through their connections, Norma and Paul began exploring the options of establishing a children’s dental clinic for families of all income and payment sources, a mission that remains consistent with that of Community Action. Before the clinic was fully established, ACAP served as the fiscal agent for the Desjardins and supported Norma and Paul in establishing a 501(c)(3), assisted with grant writing, and served as the holder of grant funds. But that was just the beginning of the support the Desjardins rallied from their community.

"From the beginning, this wasn't going to be the 'Desjardins' clinic,”’ the couple said. “This clinic is the community’s dental health clinic.”

With the partnership of the local Community Action Program, Norma and Paul built public awareness and support. They taught themselves to write grants to private foundations and secured $65,000. They made presentations to Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, VFW and American Legion. The clinic became the Presque Isle Rotary Club’s special project, which helped raise another $38,000, enough to open the clinic’s first operatory.

Since opening in 2012, the clinic has grown exponentially, as has the Desjardins’ unending commitment to their Aroostook County community, truly making them Maine Stars of Community Action.

In his remarks honoring the Desjardins, Parent noted the couple's work in coordinating the annual Festival of Trees event that serves as the St. Apollonia Dental Clinic's largest fundraiser.

"Even with that event, Norma and Paul Desjardins gave back to their local Community Action Agency," said Parent. "They partnered with us, allowing us to build the ACAP Tree of Giving out of boxes of cereal donated by our employees to help stock our community food pantries in Presque Isle and Houlton. That tree, adorned with decorations handmade by students in our Early Care and Education programs, invited event attendees to place a voting ticket in the canister with the knowledge that the token would result in another box of cereal donated to the cause by three of our local IGA stores in central Aroostook. They helped bring home the message, yet again, about supporting the most vulnerable in our community."