



THREE

SQUARES

HOW ONE LOCAL AGENCY IS FIGHTING CHILDHOOD HUNGER

“There are hundreds and hundreds of children in our area who, when they eat lunch on Friday at school, that may be the last meal they eat until they return to school on Monday for breakfast.”

~ Julie Delaney,
Northwest Harvest

by Blythe Thimsen

THANKSGIVING IS THE biggest culprit that comes to mind. After working all day to create an amazing meal, you and your guests sit down to embark upon an epic feast. Fast-forward twenty-six minutes and two heaping plates later: You push back from the table and exclaim, “I am so stuffed; I may never eat again!” For many, the festive overeating is a matter of tradition. Imagine, though, if you never experienced being full, because you were chronically hungry.

While unthinkable for those who are blessed with abundant food, hunger is a sad reality for those in our community who struggle to provide enough food for themselves or their families. According to bread.org, “We live in the world’s wealthiest nation. Yet 14.5 percent of U.S. households—nearly 49 million Americans, including 16.2 million children—struggle to put food on the table.” Watching anyone struggle with hunger is heartbreaking, but it is especially difficult to see young children go hungry. While those numbers are overwhelming, one local agency is working to lower them, and has a specific plan of attack for childhood hunger. Northwest Harvest, the only non-profit food bank distributor operating statewide in Washington, with a network of more than 350 food banks, meal programs and high-need schools, refuses to be discouraged by the enormity of the fight; rather, they press on, knowing childhood hunger can be fought by filling one little tummy at a time.

Filling those tummies takes time, effort and coordination between Northwest Harvest and the schools where some of Spokane’s hungriest students attend. Working together with principals, teachers and school counselors, Northwest Harvest has brought a successful program to several local Spokane Public Schools, called Three Squares. The program provides a weekend worth of food, every Friday, to hungry children at local schools, ensuring they will eat over the weekend. It is a program that Northwest Harvest has offered in other parts of the state, and which came to Spokane in 2010.

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HARVEST

“When we opened our warehouse in Spokane, we wanted to offer Three Squares to the high-needs schools here,” says Julie Delaney, the community engagement manager for Northwest Harvest in Spokane County. They began the program in 2010 at Holmes Elementary, and then expanded to Logan Elementary, and added Stevens Elementary in spring 2011. Now they serve five schools total. With the Southside Rotary Club and Ford Foundation providing support for the Spokane area, this coming fall they will add three additional schools. “As long as our operating agreement with the school has been met and the needs still exist in the school, and there is someone to coordinate at the school, we continue to serve schools on an annually-renewed basis after the three years,” says Delaney.

Sadly, the need does exist. Though not often spoken of, nor common knowledge, childhood hunger is a very real problem in Spokane. “For me, the greatest misconception is that in Spokane there are not that many hungry children,” says Delaney. “There are. Lots of them.”



Above: Volunteers come every Thursday to the Northwest Harvest warehouse to pack Three Squares bags to be distributed to hungry children in our area.

Left: A variety of nutritious, easy to prepare foods with long shelf lives are used to fill the bags. Food for the bags is purchased by Northwest Harvest and does not come off of food bank shelves, meaning it does not take away from feeding others.

Meghan Anderson has seen many of these hungry children, firsthand. The principal at Longfellow Elementary, in the north-central area of Spokane, Anderson was the assistant principal at Stevens Elementary when the Three Squares program began there. When she took the principal position at Longfellow, she knew she needed to work with Northwest Harvest to bring the program to her new school.

“The poverty level is about 92 percent at Stevens,” says Anderson. “Many of our students came to school starving. By starving, I mean this: We had a kiddo, a third grader, pass out at about 10 in the morning on a Monday. When paramedics came, they

talked to him and found out he hadn’t eaten all weekend. His last meal was lunch, at school, the Friday before.”

Think of the last time you skipped a meal. Do you remember how cranky, tired and focused on food that you felt? Now imagine it wasn’t just one meal that you had missed, but eight, and you’ll get an idea of what that little third grader was facing.

Hunger is not conducive to learning, something of which Anderson is very aware. “When you’re hungry, think about how hard it is to focus on something because you hear your stomach growling and you feel those hunger pangs. Now imagine trying to learn all day with that empty stomach and what

that feels like. It would be pretty impossible.”

At Anderson’s current school, roughly 83 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch and breakfast through the school. That takes care of two meals a day, but many of these children don’t have dinner at night, meaning the only meals they receive are at school.

“And that is true on the weekends as well,” says Anderson of the students’ lack of food at home. “There is very little food, and so the Three Squares program allows us to provide a weekend’s worth of meals for one student, and we are able to provide that to 25 students. They take home enough to feed themselves for two days. We know that in many cases it is shared among the family, but we know they are getting something.”

HOW IT’S DONE

At the beginning of the school year, teachers provide names of students who seem hungry on Monday mornings, and who seem to be struggling. “We take that list and prioritize it with our counselor, and look at which families really need the support,” says Anderson. “We are limited to 25. It is hard making those selections because there are so many kids who could benefit. We could feed so many more. We have a waiting list. If a family moves away, we always have one waiting in the wings.”

Though the list is long, one bright spot is that some families move off of the list. “We’ve had families that have gotten a new job and have come in and said, ‘we can provide now, can you please give this food to another student?’ Our families are very open about that and willing to support other kids.”

FRIDAY “FOODDAY”

“In talking to the teachers who serve those children dealing with poverty and hunger, Friday is not necessarily a joyous day for them,” says Delaney. “They look forward to coming back to school on Monday to get food and be with their friends.”

Those bags of food provided on Fridays don’t just feed the children for the weekend; they are helping to feed a positive future for each child. Anderson and her staff are confident the Three Squares program is making a difference in the lives of their students. “They are able to be more focused, they come to school with more energy, especially that Monday morning,” she says. “They seem to be able to hold their own during the week when they are getting fed at school; it’s really that Monday that they

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haven't eaten well over the weekend that they are exhausted and they have low energy. When they are able to bring the food home, it just looks different the way they carry themselves and the ability to focus and their energy, it's where it should be. It's sad to think that basic needs are holding them back. If kids' basic needs aren't being met, they can't learn."

The bags that the children pick up each week are packed by volunteers at Northwest Harvest, and are delivered twice monthly to the schools. "It's very thoughtful how it's done, it is not just random," says Anderson of what is provided to the children. "It is usually things they could make for themselves if they needed to, because in a lot of cases, parents are working on the weekends and kids are at home, so they need to be able to do that themselves." At the beginning of the month, these families' pantries tend to have a little bit more on the shelves, but that dissipates, so what they are getting in the weekend bags—items like macaroni and cheese, cereal, canned fruit and vegetables, chili and beans—are items that have a shelf life, so if they get it on a week their family doesn't need as much food as a week later in the month, it will stay fresh.

Though Three Square coordinators at each school are discreet about the distribution, for the sake of the children's privacy, the children themselves do not seem embarrassed about being provided with food. In fact, they are so eager to have the food they embrace the chance to pick it up each week, with Anderson noting that many race to the office.

"Most of the kids involved, they have no shame about the program," says Grant Caldwell, a school counselor at Holmes Elementary. "I've asked if they want to conceal the bag in something, but they say 'no I'm fine' and just walk out. I don't know of any kids that have felt reluctant to be a part of it or have felt shame."

Not all kids know what their classmates are picking up in the bags. And when they do find out, the reaction is often similar to what Anderson has had some students come to her office to ask: "I don't have any food in my house either, how do I get some?" That is the heartbreak of having limited funding and spots in the program.

EFFECT

Many of the families who are most at need are the working poor. "Many people have this

perspective that families in poverty are not working or they are not doing enough, but many of them are working," says Anderson. "They are working full time and still not able to provide for their families."

Sometimes it is not simply a lack of family finances that puts a student in a position of hunger; it can be all of the uncertainties and hardships of life added together. Caldwell remembers a particularly heart-wrenching story when thinking about students who have benefited from the program.

"We had a family living in a car because of a domestic violence situation," he says. "The student, mother and siblings had left the house, and the mom had lost her wallet, and couldn't get food until her next paycheck. I found out about that around the same time another student left the program, so I was able to give this student an entire box of food. It had at least eight of those bags. Since then they have found stable housing, but are staying on the program to ensure they are able to get food and have enough. That was an immediate way to get food into their hands."

The joy in knowing that a simple bag of food will do more than nourish a child for a weekend – it will give them a sense of safety, security and hope – is one of the many rewards witnessed by those who work with the Three Squares program. They are small victories in a larger landscape of sorrow.

The result of access to consistent nourishment is obvious to all involved. "The monthly reports we receive from schools convince us that Three Squares is an important supplement to the critically important meals offered at school," says Delaney. "Some of the comments we receive from coordinators show that students seem more engaged at school, are eager to come on the days they receive their backpack of food, and the parents also become more engaged with school staff."

FUNDING THE FEAST

The amount Northwest Harvest spends on the program has grown along with the rise in number of students served and the price of food. This year they spent almost \$229,000 on food for the program, all of which was funded through foundation and corporate grants, and supplemented by Northwest Harvest's operating budget. Three Squares food is purchased separately to assure it is child friendly and meets their nutritional needs. This also ensures that Northwest Harvest does not draw on

donated or purchased food bank foods for this program.

Since 2008, Northwest Harvest has grown from distributing 70,000 pounds of food to 200,000 pounds this year. While that doesn't compare with the millions of pounds distributed through food banks, those five to ten pounds in a student's backpack for the weekend make all the difference. Since 2004, when they started providing supplemental food to 480 students and their siblings each month, they've grown to serve 2,650 students and siblings, providing over 25,000 meals each month this school year.

Meeting such a demand is a daunting task and one that keeps Northwest Harvest on their proverbial toes as they strive to ensure hungry students are being fed. While they have done incredible work, there is always the concern of how to fund projects like this one. "I have a great worry with the sequestration of public funds right now and what that's going to look like, and what's going to be cut," says Anderson, regarding programs for children in general. "And programs like this impact kids. And it's not an adult issue. How do you look at a five year old and think it is okay that they are hungry? We need to do more, it's not fair. And when we cut education, all of the cuts are to kids."

The Three Squares program is a real "heart strings" program. It addresses the most basic need of those who are the most vulnerable in our community. "Whenever I have a chance to talk about the work we do with the Three Squares program, people always get emotional," says Delaney. "Not many of them have ever thought about the fact that there are hundreds and hundreds of children in our area who, when they eat lunch on Friday at school, that may be the last meal they eat until they return to school on Monday for breakfast. Addressing this need is at the core of who Northwest Harvest is as an agency and what we stand for. There can be a lot of shame associated with hunger, but at Northwest Harvest we want people to know that we are here to help in those times of need. The mission of Northwest Harvest is to provide nutritious food to hungry people statewide in a manner that respects their dignity, while fighting to eliminate hunger. Our vision is ample nutritious food is available to everyone in Washington State."

And they are starting by filling one little tummy at a time. ■

To learn more about the Three Squares program, visit www.northwestharvest.org

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