Yes, there is a free lunch—for kids in need

Most of us cherish memories of that day in June when the cry “School’s out!” rang through the warm, fresh air. We bounded out of the buildings that held us for nine months, and looked ahead to the delights of summertime and freedom. For children facing food insecurity, the joy of summer is tempered by a very practical concern: if there’s no school, where can I get lunch? This July, Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry established a partnership with the West Cook YMCA and Food Service Professionals (FSP) to provide an answer—free, nutritious lunch for kids in need.

“The whole idea came about in a really interesting way,” says Lisa Merdinger, who runs the project at the Y. Michele Zurakowski, Executive Director of the Pantry, was at a Wild About Wellness meeting with Jill Morehead, the West Cook YMCA Health Coordinator, and the subject of feeding kids at summer camp came up. Michele expressed a long-standing concern about feeding children during the summer who weren’t involved in summer camps, and who ordinarily receive free and reduced-price lunch during the school year. From there, a dialogue began.

No single organization could deal with the challenge alone, but all three brought special strengths to the program. The Y could provide a good location and experience feeding children in camp programs. FSP brought expertise on nutrition and the ability to secure government funding and cooperation. The Food Pantry could staff the effort with an intern and donate a refrigerator large enough to store sufficient food for an expanded program. The Food Pantry could also bring one of its greatest assets: a cadre of enthusiastic and able volunteers to staff the program.

“Anyone under the age of 18 who needs lunch can now come into the YMCA, without having to establish need. All they have to do is come and be fed,” says Lisa. “It’s a wonderful example of teamwork.” The lunch program operated July through August this year at the Y and will likely expand to the entire summer next year. Michele describes the program as the culmination of much investigation and thought over a long period of time. “After literally years of searching, we finally found wonderful partners,” Michele says. “We’re so proud that we were able to work together so quickly this summer once we found each other.”

The partnership will help summer to be more carefree, even for our most vulnerable children, and that’s really something to be proud of.
Whether it’s working a Saturday distribution, re-painting the pantry walls, or helping to collect food donations, the Phifers seem to be an “all-in” kind of family. In fact, you might call them the Pied Pipers—or Phifers—of volunteerism, because once they start a project, other folks tend to follow their lead.

A few years back when parents Roy and Karen wanted to involve their teenaged boys in local community service, the Pantry seemed like the perfect fit. Eventually, it became the focus of eldest son Jack’s Eagle Scout project last October. Jack oversaw the efforts of 32 volunteers for 119 hours of tireless work to repaint the Pantry space from its former bright nacho cheese hue to a softer shade of buttery yellow.

Not to be left out, middle son Sam stepped up to work on a food drive organized by the OPRF Hockey Club in 2013, called Hockey Checks Hunger, which brought in five tons of donations last December. JV and Varsity players delivered door hangers throughout the community, followed a few days later by door-to-door pick-ups, pantry delivery, and item sorting.

“Our youngest son, Ben, a cross-country runner pitched in by running door hangers on a cold night in December,” remembers Karen. The OPRF Hockey Club plans on running an expanded Hockey Checks Hunger Food Drive in December, just in time for the holiday season.

The Hockey Club kept the Food Pantry connection going during the grand opening of Ridgeland Common on June 14. Alumni hockey players from OPRF and Fenwick raised over $900 during the first game played on the new rink.

Recently, the Phifers helped organize the repainting of the newly renovated Pantry space during the last weekend of June. They generously donated materials and recruited a mix of family, scouting, hockey, and pantry volunteers to complete the job.

There’s no telling what other inspiring feats the Phifer Family may accomplish on the Pantry’s very grateful behalf. We’ll just have to stay tuned.
At the helm of operations, keeping the break-neck pace of the one-month construction schedule on track, was Paula Berg, Pantry Manager. “There have been so many moving parts involved in the success of this project, and so many people to thank,” says Berg.

Before demolition began on June 1, volunteers spent a weekend moving the pantry into its interim home in First United Church’s Centennial Hall. Grand Appliances of Forest Park expended herculean efforts moving seven commercial refrigerator-freezer units out and back into the new pantry space—at no charge. Other project team volunteers included: Architect, Greg Battoglia; Dan Gehling, Bryndahl Weston, and Gy Menninga for sanding and staining the new pantry doors; the Phifer family for recruiting and joining volunteers for cleaning and setting up 19 new shelving units, and for reorganizing the new space for the Grand Opening, July 5th.

The efforts paid off in renovated digs where clients can safely shop in a cheerful, roomy space with an efficient layout. Positive reactions abound. “Everyone’s thrilled with the new annex and pantry, and our new layout offers clients a safer, calmer, shopping experience,” confirms Berg. “It’s back to business as usual, only much better.”

The walls came tumbling down
Lifting as he climbs

Fernando rushes in to fill his shift at the Pantry on a Saturday morning, running a few minutes late because he is coming off the night shift at a local printer. Our volunteers are generally a dedicated group, but Fernando brings a particular passion to his position at the registration desk because he has been on both sides of that desk: before Fernando was a volunteer, he used to be a client.

In the teeth of the financial crisis of 2008, Fernando lost his printing job. In spite of earnest efforts to land a new position, he found himself caught in a spiralling vortex of hard times culminating in the loss of his apartment. Homeless for over four months, he finally came to PADS and Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry for help.

Fernando clearly remembers the respect and kindness he experienced as a client. “I saw all the people helping, and I felt really grateful,” he says. In 2011 he got his apartment back, and in 2012 he got a new job and soon became a Pantry volunteer.

It has been a long road, but now he is completely self-sufficient. “This is my first month without my Link Card,” he says. “I’m really proud of that.”

When he talks about the other volunteers at the Pantry, Fernando describes them as family. “I have friends of all ages, and some of us are friends outside of the Pantry. We talk about all kinds of things, and I really like the people here.”

Fernando has learned that even when you are willing to work hard, your life can change in a heartbeat—and none of us knows when we might need a hand up. Coming off the night shift on a Saturday morning, Fernando understands that situation better than most, and when someone else needs a little help, he wants to be there.

Thanks to All who Took Steps to End Hunger During Hunger Walk 2014

Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry was one of the top 5 fundraisers of the 29th Annual Hunger Walk sponsored by Greater Chicago Food Depository. Board member Melanie Halvorson cracked the top 10 of individual fundraisers. All of the funds raised go directly to purchasing food. Because we had 64 walkers, GCFD chipped in another $768, bringing our total raised to over $11,000—enough to feed 1122 families!

To all who walked, sponsored, or cheered us on, a hearty THANK YOU. Your efforts sustain our clients and enable us to fulfill our mission—working together as a community to reduce hunger locally.

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