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FEEDING THE HUNGRY

Food Project's 'Hunger Strike Force' pairs seniors, teens

Medford Food Project's newest undertaking pairs seniors and teens



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Maria Vaughan, left, visits with St. Mary's students Mackenzie Addington, Meg Vasey, Helen Thieme and Madeline Volk as part of the Medford Food Project's new program that pairs senior citizens with students. Mail Tribune / Denise Baratta

By **Tammy Asnicar**
for the Mail Tribune

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John Javna has a strategy to take the Medford Food Project to the next level in its war against hunger in the Rogue Valley.

Javna's plan is to pair retirees with high school and middle school students to form what he has dubbed the "Medford Hunger Strike Force." The intergenerational pairing, says one of the founders of the Medford Food Project, will sustain the 5-year-old organization's mission of "building community; sharing food."

The idea behind the food project is simple. Residents leave a green bag filled with nonperishable foods on their doorstep the second Saturday of even-numbered months. Neighborhood coordinators pick up the food and leave another green bag for the residents to fill over an eight-

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week period. The food is taken to a centralized collection point and distributed to local food pantries.

The young people will be the arms and legs for neighborhood coordinators, many of whom are seniors.

So far, Javna has enlisted the Community Service Committee from St. Mary's School as "ground zero" for the operation, with students from Cascade Christian, North Medford and South Medford high schools also engaged in his battle plan to shore up local food pantries.

The Medford Food Project strike force will give high school and middle school students opportunities to meet graduation requirements for volunteer service, learn lifelong lessons about helping others and establish friendships with seniors as they canvass neighborhoods, recruit food donors and deliver food six times a year to more than 15 food pantries.

Javna will host an open house from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 27, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 426 W. Sixth St., in Medford, where he hopes to recruit additional retirees. His goal is to expand the roster of 175 neighborhood coordinators.

His sales pitch includes sharing the benefits of volunteerism. He says studies show that seniors who socialize, volunteer and stay active live longer and are healthier.

Both Javna and St. Mary's Community Services Coordinator Anne Adderson believe that serving alongside young people is the perfect remedy for seniors "who want to maintain emotional and physical health by staying engaged and involved in their communities."

Adderson says the program "will allow senior citizens to not let mobility be an issue" that keeps them away from community service.

Javna also noted the results of a recent AARP survey conducted in the Rogue Valley, which found that "more opportunities for intergenerational activity" was the No. 3 priority listed among the 50-plus crowd after better housing and better jobs.

Seniors are fueled by "the students' energy, enthusiasm and idealism," he says.

Working together provides opportunities for "each to do what they do best," he says. "We are wisely using our most valuable resources."

Lori Garfield, a longtime neighborhood coordinator, admits to "no longer being quick on my feet." She appreciates the assistance of her young helper, a 15-year-old boy, whom she has seen touched by the fact "that not all people live like him. He has seen the need."

The couple of hours they spend together every two months are "wonderful," she says. "And, I am so thankful for the sense of community, and getting to know my neighbors."

Maria Vaughan, who will turn 88 in July, has been a neighborhood coordinator since the food project's inception in 2011. Two years ago, when she could no longer lift the heavy green bags, she enlisted the aid of a 10-year-old boy who has worked alongside her ever since.

"I think I might have started this intergenerational aspect," she jokes. "Gavin and I make good team. His enthusiasm is infectious."

Vaughan says she has "great hopes" for the pilot program that will enable her to stay active and not sit around.

"I can't sit around when there is such great need in our county," she says.

To date, food project volunteers have collected more than 700,000 pounds of food — the equivalent of more than 560,000 meals. Nearly 3,000 donors help keep food on the shelves of the pantries at a variety of organizations, including St. Vincent de Paul, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Maslow Project, Northwest Seasonal Workers, Medford Gospel Mission, God's Pantry and the Gleaners Network.

"In the spirit of true collaboration and inclusiveness, every pantry — regardless of its size — gets an equal share of the food," says Javna.

ACCESS, the largest provider of emergency food in Jackson County, served about 9,000 families — or 25,000 individuals — in 2015. Javna suspects the number is even higher, because a great

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number of food pantries are not in the ACCESS network, but the stats are a good “bellwether” of the hunger problem, he says.

Jerrine Rowley, who, with her husband, David, serves as a neighborhood coordinator and district coordinator, says she has seen the need for food donations increase.

“It feels good to see the green bag out on porches,” she says. “Folks are very generous — often bags are overflowing. There is very little effort for a very big payoff.”

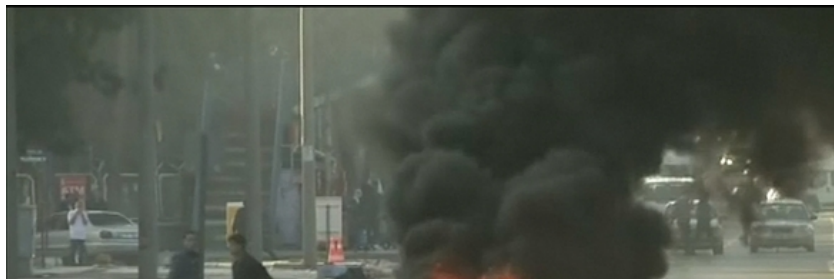
To learn more about the Medford Food Project, call 541-210-8288 or email info@MedfordFoodProject.com.

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