

Shopping for the Family (It's 1,000 Miles Away)

By LISA W. FODERARO

HASTINGS-ON-HUDSON, N.Y., Sept. 6 — Pam Koner had corralled her friends and clients into contributing to her altruistic vision before.

There were clothing drives for the needy and midnight runs into New York City to feed the homeless. There was even a request for duffel bags for boys in a nearby foster-care center who were toting their clothes in plastic garbage bags during visits home.

But this was on a different scale: to send a monthly box of groceries to a hungry family halfway across the country, indefinitely. The destination is Pembroke, Ill., a dusty township an hour south of Chicago and one of the country's poorest communities.

Ms. Koner learned of the township through a newspaper article. Average per capita income is \$9,642, less than half the state average, while the unemployment rate is more than five times the rate for the state, according to census figures. The town of 2,784 has no supermarket, no bank, no pharmacy and no police force.

What it does have are ramshackle houses, some with dirt floors, others without electricity or running water. And there is hunger, especially toward the end of the month when a food pantry runs low.

"It's our nation's secret," Ms. Koner said. "This is beyond poverty in a ghetto."

It was almost a year ago on a balmy Sunday when Ms. Koner, a slight woman with delicate features and a head of loose curls, stretched out on her deck overlooking the Hudson River. She had "beautiful music" on the stereo, she recalled, and bagels and coffee and the newspaper.

The story hit her in the solar plexus. Pictured with the article was a girl eating her one meal of the day — pasta with neck bones — as she lay on her bed, a bare filthy mattress. "I got up and opened my sliding door and walked into the living room and said, 'I've got to do something,'" she recalled.

The idea came to her immediately. As the head of a thriving business that runs after-school programs and toddler classes, Ms. Koner has access to a large number of local families. "I said, how about if I find a family here who would adopt a family there, and all we have to do is send them food once a month," she said she remembered thinking. "It would just cover that one week a month when there wasn't enough food in the food pantry."

The Family-to-Family program, as it is called, started last fall with just over two dozen families. There are now 64 families here and in the surrounding villages paired with 60 families in Pembroke. (A couple of the Illinois families are so large that Ms. Koner has connected them with two families in New York.) The goal: 100 families by October.



Richard L. Harbus for The New York Times

When Pam Koner shops for food, she keeps in mind Pembroke, Ill., one of the country's poorest communities. Her program's participants have adopted families in need there.

From the start, a national overnight shipping company, which has asked to remain anonymous, committed to the free delivery of all the boxes. Another company has offered to donate all the boxes. And the Food Emporium has agreed to contribute \$100 in gift certificates each month.

In a nod to people's hectic lives, Ms. Koner has tried to keep the program simple. Each month, she gives the Hastings families a detailed shopping list with items like one jar of Ragu meat sauce and a five-pound bag of America's Choice rice. The total usually comes to \$25. She encourages families to put in extras like shampoo, diapers, cleaners, cake mixes, instant coffee and spices.

What makes the program so appealing for families in this comfortable Westchester suburb, Ms. Koner believes, is the direct link to a family in crisis. "That tape will be cut by that family," she said. "No one else will touch that box, and another little child's hand will reach in there."

For the people in Pembroke, and the struggling village of Hopkins Park that the township encompasses, the shipments of food and other basics are a balm.

"It's truly a blessing," said Vanessa Kizart, 33, the mother of six, in a phone interview. "At the end of the month, the food stamps are running out and the food is getting low in the house and that box comes in at the right time."

The only requirement for participants in Pembroke is that they write to the families here, ideally a few times a month. "It's more than food," said Ronald Walker Sr., the outreach minister at the Church of the Cross who oversees the food pantry. "You have the opportunity to correspond with a family you know nothing about."

Mr. Walker has written for those who are illiterate, and this month, when the families arrive to collect their boxes, he will ask them to say a few words while he videotapes them.

In some strange way, the distance, Ms. Koner believes, allows for greater intimacy. And, she hopes that the food will feed more than hungry bodies. "The idea that people 1,000 miles away know that you exist is so profound," she said. "That just changes life's color wheel, and all of a sudden possibilities unfold."

As publicity has spread about the program, from the local weekly newspaper here to O, the Oprah Winfrey magazine, Ms. Koner's phone keeps ringing. There are calls from Maine, Massachusetts, Kansas, Texas and Utah, from people wanting to know how they can help or start their own program.

"The most interesting part, I think, is finding the generous spirit in others," Ms. Koner said. "Little old men are calling me on the phone, saying, 'Hello, is this Pam?' It happened to me yesterday: 'Will you take a check? I read the story about you. I'm too old to shop.'"