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Celebrating our ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY. We’re just getting started.
One Family Helping Another

A start in Westchester turns into a national nonprofit network of giving.

by Nancy Hennessey
Community contributor

You might call Pam Koner the Hastings-on-Hudson food pantry’s personal guardian angel. When the growing number of families in need outpaced donations to the pantry three years ago, Koner found a way to help. She created Kids Can! – an in-school, year-long canned food drive that yielded thousands of food item donations for several Rivertowns pantries. She also linked up individual donor families one-to-one with 50 Hastings and Dobbs Ferry families who needed food, with each donor providing their matched family with a monthly grocery gift card.

And with the need still growing (the Hastings food pantry currently feeds about 100 people monthly, including 50 children), Koner is now launching a new program to keep both the Hastings and Dobbs Ferry pantries well stocked – this one involving the entire community. She calls it The DoorKnob Dinner Project because participating donors will leave a bag of groceries to provide a simple dinner for a family of five hanging from their front door knob once a month. A sample dinner might be pasta, sauce, broccoli and bread. Neighborhood coordinators will pick up the bags and deliver them to the pantry. “It’s a simple and affordable way to bring the community together to share our bounty and help our own,” she says. The idea is based on a similar food drive project called PORCH started in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Koner, who is 62, is no stranger to finding solutions to hunger through creative giving projects. She’s the founder and Executive Director of Family-to-Family, a national nonprofit hunger and poverty relief organization she runs out of the basement of her Hastings-on-Hudson home. The organization specializes in linking families with “more” to those with “less” through out of the box, personal giving projects. “My hope is that by providing hands-on ways for families to reach out to those in need, the habit of giving will become embedded in the culture of the family,” she says. “Getting children involved in giving is particularly important to me, because I believe that when children are taught to be compassionate givers at a young age, they’ll be givers for the rest of their lives.”

Linking families with families

Koner started Family-to-Family in 2002 after reading a front page New York Times article about poverty in rural America. Says Koner, “When it comes right down to it, we’re really all one family, and we’re meant to help one another.”

Photo courtesy of Family-to-Family

Pam Koner started Family-to-Family in 2002 after reading a front page New York Times article about poverty in rural America. Says Koner, “When it comes right down to it, we’re really all one family, and we’re meant to help one another.”

Photo courtesy of Family-to-Family

Koner started Family-to-Family in 2002 after reading a front page New York Times article about poverty in rural America. The article profiled the town of Pembroke, Illinois, where most roads were dirt, many homes had no electricity, tires sat atop damaged roofs to keep them from blowing away and children went hungry. “There was a photograph with the article of a young girl lying on a filthy bare mattress eating her one meal of the day – a plate of chicken bones and pasta,” Koner remembers. “I assumed it was a child in a third world country, until I read more and found out she lived right here in the United States. There I was, sitting on my comfortable deck overlooking the Hudson River, eating bagels and reading the paper. My own two daughters were well-fed and clothed and our refrigerator was stocked. I felt compelled to do something there and then.”

What she did was contact a church pastor in Pembroke who
gave her the names of 17 of the neediest families. She gathered 16 Westchester friends and neighbors, and matched each one with a Pembroke family. Once a month each Westchester family would shop for groceries for “their” family, filling a box with rice, pasta, peanut butter and jelly, cereal, mac and cheese, soup, tuna and beans as well as a personal letter. The boxes were shipped to arrive in Pembroke the last week of the month, when food stamps were typically used up and food pantries were bare. Many Pembroke families wrote back, and the correspondence led to deep ties between families living miles, and worlds apart.

Koner felt that the personal connection forged between families through writing and shipping a box was crucial to making the project work. “That way kids could get involved by helping with the shopping or writing to a child in the other family. By exchanging letters, donors get a clear sense of how different life is if you’re poor. At the same time, the idea that someone hundreds, even thousands of miles away knows that you exist, and cares, is profound for a family limited by a life of extreme poverty.”

As the program grew, Koner added an automatic, online option, making sponsoring a family easier and allowing the program to expand nationally. Donors sign up through the Family-to-Family website (family-to-family.org) to donate $35 a month, which Koner and her staff use to purchase groceries from a local food bank or grocery store for the families that are sponsored. Additional items and letters are sent by sponsors through the mail to the family they’re helping.

Using this one-to-one model, over the last 10 years Family-to-Family has provided food for more than 1.5 million meals to family members in 25 U.S. communities in 12 states. Today, approximately 750 families are linked across the country through the Sponsor a Family program.

The success of the program led Koner to realize that her “one family helping another” model could, as she put it, be “morphed” to meet other needs. “A TV network filmed a news piece that showed one of our sponsored families opening their box of food, and inside the box, along with groceries, there were two beautiful picture books. When the little girls in the family saw those books, their eyes just lit up. That was when it dawned on me that we could use our one-to-one model to provide books to book hungry kids. Hungry minds need nourishment just like hungry bellies.”

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That realization led Koner to launch “One Book at a Time” – a program linking individual donor families with children who love to read but who come from families that can’t afford books. Every month for 12 months the book donor chooses and sends a new book along with a letter to the child they’re matched with, who writes back. Koner says that families looking for ways to teach their own kids about empathy have flocked to the program, and today more than 200 children receive a book every month through this “pen pal” giving project.

Last year, after discovering that families living under the poverty line can’t use their SNAP (formerly the food stamps program) benefits to buy basic hygiene items such as shampoo and toothpaste, Koner and her staff created “Shower to the People,” another one-to-one sponsorship program that provides families with a monthly supply of personal care products. Donors sign up online to donate $15 a month and Family-to-Family purchases the products or provides a gift card.

A look at the Family-to-Family website provides a glimpse into Koner’s talent for creating unique giving projects. Among others, there’s the Birthday Giving Project, where kids decorate and fill a shoebox with everything needed for a birthday party for a child in need, and the Stuffed Shirts project, where donors tie large, new t-shirts around bottles of shampoo, soap and toothpaste and then bring their packages to a homeless shelter.

To date, families and individuals in 41 states around the country have been recipients of one or more of Family-to-Family’s giving projects.

Of the many projects Family-to-Family has developed, Koner says her favorite is The GivingWorks! Empathy Project, a literacy and empathy-building program that gives impoverished teens the opportunity to have a giving experience. “Children living in poverty are often the recipients of charitable giving, but they may not have the means or opportunity to give to others.”

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explains. “Those of us who give of ourselves know how good it feels to share our bounty. This project is a way to provide those children with that very same ‘giving’ experience.” Through GivingWorks!, middle and high-school aged kids choose and label books provided by Family-to-Family to read to and then give to younger children in a kindergarten or Head Start program. So far about 1,000 children have participated in GivingWorks! events.

Corporations sponsorships

As Family-to-Family has grown, corporate interest in what Koner refers to as their “little engine that could” nonprofit has grown as well. In 2012 Welch’s began a three-year partnership with Family-to-Family that will enable its hunger relief sponsorship program to expand to 50 states by 2015. In 2013, High Ridge Brands, makers of VO5, Coast and Zest, provided funding to help launch Shower to the People. FedEx has donated free and discounted shipping for more than 10 years.

Koner’s energy and enthusiasm for helping others is infectious, and she pushes herself and her staff to make things happen fast. Within a few hours after formulating the DoorKnob Dinners idea, a project coordinator had been assigned; an email asking for volunteers had been written and sent to the mayor and school principal of Hastings-on-Hudson to blast out; and the idea had been posted on Facebook. Within two days 50 volunteers had already signed on to help. Koner has also begun reaching out to community organizers in other states to discuss how to launch DoorKnob Dinners in their communities. She is optimistic about its potential to have a real impact on hunger in America. “The way I see it, DoorKnob Dinners could catch on in a big way across the country, making it possible for families everywhere to share their bounty with their neighbors in need. After all, when it comes right down to it, we’re really all one family, and we’re meant to help one another.”

About the author: Nancy Hennessey is the Program Director at Family-to-Family. To learn more about the organization, visit family-to-family.org or call 914-478-0756.