

DONOR OF THE DAY | By Alexander Heffner

Creating Network of Family Providers

A Westchester, N.Y., former freelance fashion stylist and producer is nourishing needy communities, one family at a time. Pam Koner, 61 years old, is the founder and director of Family-to-Family, a national hunger-relief nonprofit that provides food to struggling families. The timing of their work is critical: The group supplies food during the last week of the month, when many pantry shelves are bare.

The organization, which operates from the donations of sponsor families, estimates that about \$1,153,000 in funds have provided food for disadvantaged families as well another \$145,000 for monthly drive items, like backpacks for the new school year and over-the-counter medicines during flu season. Between food and other basic necessities, Family-to-Family will reach \$1.3 million in donations this month.

A 2002 newspaper profile exposing the profound plight of rural America—specifically in Pembroke, Ill., where half of families were reported to live below the poverty line—spurred Ms. Koner into action.



Pam Koner

"I was completely taken by [a] photograph of a young girl, who looked like she was in destitute poverty in Haiti or a third-world country. I didn't think this could be in the United States."

As she read her Sunday paper, Ms. Koner saw a beautiful Hudson River vista from her house's porch alongside her

"lovely, well-fed and well-clothed daughters."

"It was really a moment of inspiration. I was on a mission—that day, Sunday," she recalled. "That's the kernel of what became a substantially larger organization. I knew a lot of people who could share their bounty."

In order to remedy the absence of essential infrastructure in cities like Pembroke, Ms. Koner launched her effort, pairing New York neighbors in Hastings-on-Hudson and surrounding towns with families in need. But in addition to deliveries of groceries—items such as rice and beans, macaroni and cheese, peanut butter and jelly and salt and pepper—the family donors sent letters and photos, starting a chain reaction that has fueled ongoing correspondence—and care.

"What I hope is that giving becomes part of the culture and embedded in the fabric of a family forever," she says.

Ms. Koner's model expanded to include direct purchase of food for families in local communities—teaming up with local pantries to provide

15,000 meals per month in what it calls a "family sponsorship program." The recipients—thanks to many middle-class families who donate \$30 monthly—live in some 23 communities selected based on their low-income population in census data.

She says she is moved by the connection strangers feel to families they are helping. She prides the program on being the anti-generic charity, because she is able to customize her work around the needs of individual families. "In Brighton Beach, we're working with an organization that helps immigrant families. What's best for them—because of dietary issues—is to provide gift cards," she says.

In addition to feeding the hungry, Family-to-Family has recently unveiled "Giving Works!" a pilot literacy program in which the group delivers children's books to after-school programs in poor neighborhoods. The group plans a national rollout of this initiative in Cherryfield, Maine, Honolulu and Paterson, N.J. this September.