

A View of NEFP from the Inside Out

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Volunteers are the strength and the heart of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Northeast Emergency Food Program (NEFP). Theirs are the hours spent in collecting, organizing and sorting food. Theirs are the bodies that haul food in and out of its basement storage and that maintain the house and yard that are home to the program. Theirs are the smiles that greet neighbors in need of help to make it through hard times. Theirs are the eyes and ears that see and hear about the joys and pains of food house guests. Theirs are the hearts that open to their community and respond to need with service. Some volunteers come back year after year to serve; and it is they who hold the memories of NEFP and who know best why it is so important in their community. This is a profile of NEFP through the eyes of three of its long serving volunteers.

Meet the volunteers:

- 1) Harry has been volunteering at NEFP for 11 years. He used to live in the neighborhood and teach up the street at the Highland School. He got started at NEFP after getting to know former director Jack Kennedy through working with him on lecture programs at the First Methodist Church. He volunteers here because it is part of his community. He has since retired from teaching and moved out of the neighborhood, but he keeps coming back. Harry has been a jack of all trades at NEFP. He has done almost every job through the years, and is currently a Tuesday afternoon regular, working in the kitchen to fix the food boxes to put out orders.
- 2) Katherine Bentley is an eight-year volunteer of NEFP. A well-aged woman with a small build, she is well-respected among other NEFP workers as a spunky woman who can keep Produce Day crowds in line with her system of order and the look of her eyes. She started volunteering in response to a request for volunteers that was made one Sunday at her church, Redeemer Lutheran. When Katherine moved from Denver to Portland over 20 years ago, she immediately sought ways to spend her elder years in community service. Already a volunteer at four different places when she heard about NEFP, Katherine saw it as her responsibility to answer this call for help in her neighborhood. Her regular post is as Saturday afternoon host, greeting people as they walk in the door and inviting them to sign in and "keeping things in order."
- 3) Kristi Pearson-Denning is a mother of two and a NEFP volunteer for over eight years. Community work and mothering are both important to Kristi, and NEFP has been a place where she can both model community activity and involve her children in it. Kristi has been very active in all roles at the food house, including service on the now defunct advisory council, and her current post is doing Thursday afternoon in-take, registering guests on the computer to receive their food. She has spent the past 14 years as a full time mother and active in the schools, and she has just returned to work in a food co-op.

Their extraordinary service

With collectively over 27 years of involvement with the program, these three volunteers have done just about any job there is to do at the food house. Through the years they have each played their roles in contributing to the functioning and improvement of the program and making the house shine within the community.

When Harry first arrived, all of the food was stored in boxes in the basement, so Harry started to organize shelves to store the food on. At first people did not really want to pick up

the system, but it is now an irreplaceable system for food storage and organization. Nowadays, the Oregon Food Bank brings a weekly delivery of food out to NEFP in a big truck. However, for several days back in the years before delivery, Harry used to pick up all of the food. Sometimes the orders were so big, that he had to make several trips in his truck. He jokes saying that he “stuffed up the loading dock so much” that they decided to start delivering the food themselves. Katherine is credited as the only person who could bring order to the monthly Thursday afternoon produce program. She created a system that everyone—regardless of language differences—could follow, and under her watchful eyes, the chaos of produce share days was given order.

Their dedication to NEFP is also evidenced in their efforts at outreach to the greater community. Harry is a church member at the St Luke Lutheran Church in southwest Portland, and despite NEFP being located in northeast Portland, Harry has made it his mission to keep it on the church agenda, calling himself the “resident expert” on the food house. While serving on the church’s social concerns committee, he worked to keep NEFP at the front of their concerns; and Harry is happy that others from the church are now coming out to the house to volunteer as well. As a member of an advisory counsel, Kristi has helped to hold community celebrations, where people in the neighborhood were invited to the park for a free meal and time of fellowship.

Why volunteer?

They work in different jobs throughout the food house, but Harry, Kristi and Katherine are all motivated to volunteer by the drive to be active in serving their community. If you ask Harry why he volunteers, he will jokingly say, “It’s a day I don’t have to pull weeds at home,” but his years of dedication show that this is not the full story. If you ask again, he will tell you that it is the satisfaction he gets from seeing the people and working with the other volunteers, who are “great people and fun to be around.” Kristi sees herself as gaining from being able to touch other people’s lives and make them better, observing that “being able to give is a luxury that not everybody has.” For Katherine, it’s all just a bit simpler, as she says, “You’re in the neighborhood and you want to help out. That’s all I know. I do it because I think I should be doing something. I think all of us should do our share of what we can to help other people who need it.” Kristi echoes this sentiment, saying, “I really feel like everybody should be doing something. Volunteering really makes you feel good. I think it’s important to do something in my community.” Volunteering also brings a sense of gratitude to volunteers. “It makes me count my blessings all the time,” says Kristi, “even to have the time to be there volunteering.”

So, what makes NEFP so important?

So, why do Harry, Katherine and Kristi think that the food program is so important? They meet the people being served. According to Harry, for some of them, this program “is imperative to keep them eating.” Even for those with other resources such as food stamps, “It’s important because of the number of things we can supply them with that they can’t get on food stamps.” These things are extras, like toilet paper and diapers, which are always given out in addition to the food boxes. Katherine emphasizes that the program is not like regular welfare, because it helps people in emergencies and is “probably a lifesaver to some of those people.” Kristi points out the many challenges to people who find themselves suddenly in a situation where they need the help and the difficulties that come in trying to find the assistance to get back on their feet. She says, “I just can’t imagine having to work that hard for food.”

One might call the NEFP food house a food distribution center, but the volunteers know that it is much more. Katherine says that volunteers “try to make it a pleasant place to come, like a little home” to take people over the rough spot.” Harry also comments on the community warmth found in the food house, saying that he loves days when there are women sitting around talking, with half a dozen kids playing on the floor. “You would think it was a community center,” he says, “it’s a meeting place.” Kristi sees work at the food house as a way of strengthening community. Community members come together and work together, getting to know each other, and getting to know the people they are serving. Those being served are often also the ones serving, and Kristi remarks that no matter how poor they may be, guests to the food house are often very happy to help out and give what they can to help others.

When the front doors open

NEFP is an emergency food program, so there are always new and changing faces coming through the door. Some guests, being invited to receive a food box up to six times a year and to come any time for bread and produce, do become known faces and personalities to volunteers at the food house. However, some of these volunteers’ most memorable experiences with guests have come from interactions with people who are to them complete strangers. Harry says that some of the greatest times are when people who have been struggling through unemployment come in to tell of finding a job. He remembers one special time, when five minutes before closing, a woman came bursting through the door jumping up and down and screaming with joy. She was a regular at the food house and had just found her first job in two-and-half years.

Sometimes it is the small tragedies that bring humor into the home and opportunities for volunteers to pitch in. Kristi first found the food program after reading an article printed in the paper near Thanksgiving, telling the story of a bunch of turkeys that had been stolen from the house. After contributing to the fund established to replace the turkeys, she decided to become a regular volunteer. Harry remembers one occasion when he was obliged to drive a father home with the food he was picking up for his family of five. The man had himself brought a stolen grocery cart to transport his food, but while he was in the house, someone stole that cart from him.

Other times, the stories that guests bring in can be just heartbreaking to the volunteers. Kristi hears a lot of stories in the in-take room when people frustrated and tired with their situations are really most in need of someone to listen to them and care. Katherine remembers one special couple that she met. A series of events had thrown medical problems and unemployment at them subsequently. When they came into NEFP, Katherine was glad to be able to give them food, but saddened because she said, “They were the nicest people you’d ever meet, and I thought, ‘How could that happen to them?’ I keep praying for them that they’re going to be alright.” Kristi has been especially touched to see the gratitude of guests. As a two-year old, Kristi’s daughter Sonia used to help out in such ways as carrying birthday cakes out to guests. Kristi remembers with joy how much some people were touched by this that they would cry with gratitude.

Changes the years have brought

One thing that all volunteers agreed upon is that the number of people being served by the program is going up. While they point out positively that people come because they receive a welcome, kind service and barely any chance of denial, the greater numbers also seem to gloomily signify a greater need in the community. Though they love their food

house, they would love even more for the need to decline and put them out of business. Kristi remarks, "It is extremely disconcerting that the need has grown exponentially." As evidence she notes that when she started about eight years ago, they thought 85 was a big number of people to be served in a day. Just recently, food was given out to feed 215 people on one day. Harry echoes her observations, saying that in the past three years there has been an increase in the number of people who are served due to an increase in the size of the families who come in. One Tuesday afternoon, he gave an example, saying, "Today we had about 40 people served. That would have been a whole week's worth years ago."

There have also been some changes in the program. It had to reduce the number of days open about a year and a half ago due to a budget crunch. Harry says, that this has not really hurt the program, because they are still able to fill the needs of the community, but it has concentrated the service and caused people to pile up a bit more during the times it is open. Though the times have been crunched, in other areas NEFP has opened up a lot more over the years. Kristi talks a lot about the ways in which the program has found ways to give freedom to clients, always with the goal of operating with respect. The "choice board" was created, and some of the rules, like geographic limitations and necessary referrals, were eliminated. They have also been able to become more generous with the food given.

The gifts of NEFP

Harry, Katherine and Kristi are incredible gifts to NEFP. For now, Katherine is on break from NEFP, as she recovers from a broken neck and adjusts to fading vision. But with her regular spunk, she is quick to say about her broken neck, "but that don't stop me." About the prospects of her return, she says with frankness and a tone of determination, "I can probably do it with what vision I have left." It is such spirit that is found in the volunteers at NEFP. They are a dedicated group, blessing their community with a home where food is not merely delivered, but given with love.