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The Pine Grove Community Church

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Fostering Food Security in Allegan County

Nelda is one of many seniors who struggle with food insecurity in West Michigan, but her story is unique — Nelda has struggled with food insecurity for her entire life. She attends the Feeding America West Michigan monthly Mobile Food Pantry at the United Church of Wayland, and it has impacted her life in more ways than she could have ever imagined.

Finding enough food to maintain adequate nutrition has never been easy for Nelda. Growing up, her parents had 10 mouths to feed which meant that Nelda and her siblings frequently ate the same inexpensive, nonperishable foods without much variation. “There were times I can remember where they [her parents] had to let a couple of bills go because they had so many to feed and back then, they didn’t have stuff like this [Mobile Food Pantries],” Nelda said. “I wish it was [available] when we were growing up because we could have used it. We didn’t have a lot of fresh vegetables or fruit. We were missing out on quite a bit,” Nelda continued. She recalls opening her lunch box at primary school and being embarrassed by what was inside. People around her would have fresh, nutritious food that she had never experienced. One instance she spoke about revolved around a ripe peach that another student pulled out of their lunch box. She recalls asking them what it was, because she simply didn’t know. “We were never around that fresh stuff,” Nelda said.

As she grew up, her access to fresh foods didn’t improve. Nelda worked for 30 years as a teacher’s assistant in a preschool, but she never earned quite enough to avoid making compromises while grocery shopping. She and her husband each had six children of their own when they got married; and together they raised all 12. Resembling her own childhood, their grocery bill was always stretched thin.

Even after their children moved out and started families of their own, Nelda’s access to nutritious food still did not improve. As she aged, Nelda found herself struggling with various health problems that required, and still require, frequent doctors’ visits and expensive prescription medication to manage. Her husband has also accumulated health issues, broadening the healthcare portion of their budget. The couple’s insurance only picks up a



portion of the medical bills and they have to come up with the rest. Before finding the Mobile Food Pantry, they would have to dip into their grocery budget. Living on a fixed income is difficult enough without healthcare bills piling up. “It was getting to the point where we said ‘okay, which medications do we give up in order to eat?’ With this [Mobile Food Pantry], thank goodness, it helps us out a heck of a lot,” Nelda said.

Having access to fresh, nutritious food through the Feeding America West Michigan Mobile Food Pantry has done more than help offset the couple’s monthly bills; it has actually improved Nelda’s health. For the first time in her life, Nelda has consistent access to fresh food, and her doctors have seen improvements in her overall health. After attending the Mobile Pantry for a few months, Nelda’s doctors told her “boy, you must be eating a lot of vegetables and fresh fruits!”

As a lifelong resident of Wayland, Nelda is a testament to the positive impact that introducing community resources, like this Mobile Food Pantry, can make.

Donor Spotlight:

MORRISON FAMILY CONTINUES LEGACY OF GIVING

When Jack Morrison retired as CEO of Morrison Industrial Equipment more than 15 years ago, he and his wife Mary decided to devote their retirement years to philanthropic giving.

“The first thing we said was, ‘We want a fund to put our money into places that can be used to help others,’” Jack explained. “We decided that Feeding America West Michigan was one of the most valuable charities. So we said, ‘We’re going to put that priority number one.’”

Long-term donors like Jack and Mary ensure the longevity of Feeding America West Michigan’s mission to relieve hunger and increase food security in its service area.

Each dollar donated to Feeding America West Michigan stretches far — just \$1 provides four meals to those who would otherwise go without. This resonates with Jack:

“I can’t think of another organization where I can spend my money that can do as much for feeding people,” he said.

The impact Jack and Mary have had on the hungry in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula is priceless. Over their many years of generous giving, they have provided an estimated 120,000 meals for their hungry neighbors.

Jack’s father began Morrison Industrial in 1953, and Jack, along with his two brothers, joined the family business the following year. At first, the company employed just a dozen people; now, they employ more than 400.

Feeding America West Michigan’s partnership with Morrison Industrial has proved invaluable, beyond financial donations. The company initially launched as a forklift dealer but now offers a variety of warehouse equipment, including industrial batteries, storage racks, floor sweepers and scrubbers.

Without warehouse equipment, none of the food bank’s operations would be possible. Feeding America West Michigan’s director of operations, Zach Saucier, recalls taking advantage of Morrison Industrial’s fairly priced equipment many times.

“Their equipment helps our warehouse operations run

smoothly, and it lasts a long time,” Zach said. “Morrison Industrial has been a valued partner of ours for many years.”

Jack’s nephew and current company president, David, emphasized how both the Morrison family and those who work at Morrison Industrial value Feeding America West Michigan’s mission.

“When we think about food scarcity and we think about people not having food, we think about how we can help others,” David said.

“For the last 65 years, we’ve tried to be good stewards in our marketplace and in our community,” he said. “Continuing to work with Feeding America West Michigan allows us to continue to be a force for good in our community.”

Recently, Morrison Industrial hosted a fund drive for Feeding America West Michigan. Twenty-two employees contributed to the fund, and the company donated nearly \$2,000.



Photo courtesy of Jack Morrison

“You guys reach out and help so many other groups,” David said. “When we signed up [for the fund drive], I couldn’t tell you how many people at Morrison came to me and said our church pantries get food through Feeding America West Michigan.”

David recalls sitting with his cousins when he was young and hearing advice from his Uncle Jack: “He encouraged us to start giving and to try small amounts and to start being involved,” he said.

Today, Jack is still giving generously to many nonprofits that support the community.

“I just think Feeding America West Michigan is such a great organization. It’s well run, well organized. I’ve been impressed with it since I first got involved,” Jack said. “You are really unique and I just admire and respect your organization so much.”

Feeding America West Michigan can never thank its partners enough for all they do. Whether they donate a dollar or, like the Morrison family and company, donate many dollars each year and provide affordable equipment, their support improves the food bank — and, as a result, the lives of those experiencing hunger in the community.



Agency Spotlight: Pine Grove Community Church

CHANGING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH SENIOR MEALS AND MOBILE FOOD PANTRIES

In Michigan's most rural areas, those living with food insecurity often face challenges accessing the services they need to thrive. In Howard City, Pine Grove Community Church is fighting to change this: Each month, they host a lunch for seniors as well as a Feeding America West Michigan Mobile Food Pantry.

The church sits near the county lines that separate Newaygo and Montcalm Counties, both of which demonstrate high need with poverty rates of 16.3 and 17.9 percent, respectively — much higher than Feeding America West Michigan's service area as a whole.

Rural living can exacerbate poverty and hunger. Job opportunities are commonly scarce, and those without reliable transportation frequently lack access to grocery stores. This lack of access can particularly affect seniors, who are more susceptible to hunger-related illnesses and may suffer more strongly from a lack of interaction with their community.

"There are not many locations for seniors to gather," explained Kristy Wolters, Pine Grove Community Church's senior meals program coordinator.

Seeing this need, Pine Grove members began hosting communal meals for seniors more than 15 years ago. The program not only fills these seniors' stomachs, but their afternoons with time to socialize as well. Between April and November, 120 -140 seniors attend the lunches. They begin at noon, but many attendees arrive at 10:30 a.m. to chat with friends over punch or coffee. To keep the program affordable, Kristy turns to Feeding America West Michigan.

"I plan our menu through the food that Feeding America [West Michigan] offers at such a reduced cost," Kristy said. "I cannot count the number of times I have walked into the Feeding America warehouse planning a meal only to find exactly the food I need for that meal."

Each senior meal takes a lot of preparation and is entirely volunteer-run. Volunteers begin setting up the day before, and on the day of the event, 12-18 volunteers help cook, serve, greet, play music, speak, lead bingo and, of course, clean up.

"We see people returning every month," Kristy said. "They make friendships at the lunches and they meet up with friends. It is a joy to see them spending time together."

Senior lunches aren't the only way Pine Grove feeds community members. For the past thirteen years, the church has also hosted Mobile Food Pantries through Feeding America West Michigan. Today, these Mobile Food Pantries offer roughly 5,000 pounds of grocery store staples, including fresh produce, protein and dairy products — enough to send 50 pounds of food home with 100 community members — each month. In 2018, Pine Grove's Mobile Food Pantries distributed nearly 60,000 pounds of food into the surrounding community.

"We have a chance to build community with them," food pantry coordinator John VanderPloeg said. "You hear some of their concerns, illnesses and things."

Moments that stick out to him are when clients arrive saying

their cupboards are empty, but leave with a cart full of groceries. Community members benefitting from the Mobile Food Pantries include Teresa and her father Terry. Teresa lives on a fixed income and Terry, recovering from a recent surgery as well as an earlier eye replacement, is rendered unable to work. The Mobile Food Pantries go a long way toward helping them make ends meet.

Henry, one of the church's volunteers, has participated in the pantries along with his six daughters for the past couple of years. He has noticed how the Mobile Food Pantries bring the community together, and how clear the need is for many attendees. He's been particularly struck by the poor conditions of people's cars and how, during the first cold Mobile Food Pantry, clients often aren't dressed warm enough for the weather.

"A lot of people who come to the food truck have to carpool. They have to find rides but they get there," he said.

Henry's daughters love volunteering and convince their dad to go even when it's cold out.

"There's a couple months out of the year that I'd like to skip it, but they won't let me," he said. "We try to teach them a lot that it's important to give when you can. We raised them that it's important to help other people."

Like anywhere in the 40 counties Feeding America West Michigan serves, the lines between client and volunteer often blur: 1 in 8 people face food insecurity, so it's not surprising that volunteers, like Henry and his mother-in-law, sometimes take their turn in line at the end of the day.

Kristy and John see firsthand how the programs they provide impact those in need, but acknowledge that their clients impact them as well.

"The people who attend our lunches are a blessing to us every time they come," Kristy said. "We hope the free lunches are at least as much a blessing to them as the love of these seniors has been to us."

"Without the support of Feeding America, we could not run our program," Kristy said.

Just as agencies like Pine Grove Community Church rely on Feeding America West Michigan to provide affordable food, the food bank relies on its 900 agency partners to bring that food to neighbors in need. The effects of partnerships like this one can be felt beyond just this one community — each of the food bank's partner agencies enable Feeding America West Michigan to carry out its vision of a community in which all neighbors are nourished and empowered.



Photo courtesy of Pine Grove Community Church

Meet a Food Banker

KELLY CROSSE,
Board Chairperson

Q: What is your professional background and how did you become involved with Feeding America West Michigan?

A: I have an advanced degree in labor relations and human resources and I have work experience with talent acquisition and succession planning. A colleague of mine at Amway was serving on the Board and was transferring for work and no longer able to serve. Knowing that the Food Bank CEO was having some health concerns and may need to step down, he thought my skillset would be valuable and asked me to learn more. I was immediately impressed by the organization and driven to do more for the cause so I joined and have served on the board nine years now.

Q: What was your first experience with food insecurity in our community?

A: Working with Kids' Food Basket. I had volunteered for them a few times and donated before I even knew Feeding America West Michigan existed. I really didn't understand what it was or how it worked. One of my first "aha" moments was coming in and meeting with John Arnold [the former president and CEO] and finally understanding how Feeding America West Michigan works, largely behind the scenes, to rescue and acquire food and support agency partners.

Q: What would you tell someone who is considering becoming involved with Feeding America West Michigan?

A: To come in and take a tour and really learn more about everything that Feeding America West Michigan does. Participate in a Mobile Food Pantry or go see one. Come visit the warehouse. Come meet with some of the staff or some of the agency partners. Talk to a Board member. Just learn. I am confident you will be impressed and perhaps compelled to see how you can help.

Q: What do you wish people knew about hunger and our work in the community?

A: I wish that they knew there were so many people similar to their neighbors, colleagues, friends, that are actually recipients of our services. The need is significant.

Q: What causes are you passionate about outside of hunger relief?

A: For me, it's all of the things that contribute to systemic poverty. Homelessness, joblessness, education and hunger all contribute to the ongoing issue of poverty, where we haven't been able to break the cycle.

Q: What do you like doing in your free time?

A: I love being active — hiking, biking, working out, spending time with friends and family, cooking — I just had a big "cookie fest" Christmas cookie baking session with a group of girlfriends and all of our kids. I enjoy many things.

Q: If you were an animal, what would you be?

A: I would be my dog, Yuki, because she lives the life! She's the happiest dog in the whole world. She gets so excited to go to Home Depot or ride in the car.



Nine Schools Hosted Food Drives for Food Fight Fridays

AREA SCHOOLS BROUGHT 38,491 MEALS TO THE HUNGRY THIS FALL

School rivalries made a difference for the hungry this fall when nine West Michigan schools competed in the first annual Food Fight Fridays campaign, a food drive challenge put on by Fox 17 in partnership with Feeding America West Michigan.

Every week of the fall semester, a different school mobilized to host a food drive in support of Feeding America West Michigan and the school's local community. Each Friday, Fox 17 and a food bank representative visited the schools, celebrated with the students, and packed the food to be transported, weighed, and distributed to local food pantries and service organizations throughout the community.

Ultimately, Plainwell High School, the final school to compete, took home the Food Fight Friday trophy by collecting more than 12,229 pounds of food — the equivalent of nearly 10,000 meals. The school will boast the trophy in their halls until next year's competition.

Thornapple Kellogg came in second place with almost 8,000 pounds of food, and East Kentwood came in third with almost 7,000 pounds.

Much of the food collected over the course of the semester was donated to Feeding America West Michigan and distributed to West Michigan residents struggling with food insecurity by way of the food bank's many partner agencies. Some schools, however, earmarked their food for specific organizations right in their communities.

Otsego High School's food donations went to the Otsego Christmas Basket Project, giving families in need access to holiday meals. Students also asked for toy donations to add to the meal baskets.

All 9,954 of the meals that Plainwell raised went to their community through the Plainwell Christmas Project.

Beyond Belding's 1,361 pounds of donated food, they raised more than \$1,300 for The B Foundation, an organization which supports those in Belding undergoing cancer treatments.

In total, students at the nine competing schools — Plainwell, Otsego, Thornapple Kellogg, East Kentwood, Wayland Union, Greenville, Grandville, Belding and West Ottawa — collected 49,268 pounds of food, or 38,491 meals, all of which were put directly back into their communities.

Each school's contribution ensured countless West Michigan neighbors had consistent access to meals this past holiday and fall season. Feeding America West Michigan is continuously humbled by the generosity of its community partners: Fox 17, the participating schools, and every student and family who stepped up to help their fellow neighbors by donating during the campaign.



Get Involved

Help your neighbors in need by getting involved with Feeding America West Michigan.



\$1 = 4 MEALS

Donations are put directly into the hands of families in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula!



ADVOCATE

Have a way with words? Help spread our mission by letting people in your community know about our services, or contact your local lawmakers to advocate on behalf of life-saving hunger relief legislature!



1 VOLUNTEER HOUR = 200 MEALS

Repack food in our warehouse, glean produce at a local farm, or volunteer to assist setup, distribution, and tear down at a local mobile pantry.



89,700

Number of hungry children in Feeding America West Michigan's service area.

FEEDING AMERICA
West Michigan

864 West River Center Drive NE
Comstock Park, MI 49321
616.784.3250
FeedWM.org

We gather and distribute food to relieve hunger and improve food security in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. By working with more than 900 local hunger-relief agencies, we are able to serve half a million people in need each year.

Call us at 616.784.3250 or learn more at FeedWM.org.

Feeding America West Michigan is a member of Feeding America, The United Way, and The Food Bank Council of Michigan.

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