

Hope Served Daily

By: Sheila Hudson

The Ramirez family moved to Athens because the father was promised a job. However, when they arrived, the job offer disappeared. Now the family of four is in a temporary shelter and in need of food. George is retired from a public service position. He and his wife live on a fixed income. Unusually high medical bills forced him to ask for help. Lila is a single mom working for minimum wage at a poultry-processing plant. A financial emergency left her unable to buy groceries for her family of five.

The names in these cases have been changed, but their emergencies have not. Each was referred to the Athens Area Emergency Food Bank for help, and each found it.

Lisa Ganschow, manager, and Kim Ramos, assistant manager, see clients with similar emergencies every day--11,000 in the past 10 years. Lisa estimates they have around 50 referrals a week. She says their client load reflect the economy with the peak load occurring in 1993. It has been decreasing slightly every year.

"We have around 1 or 2 volunteers per day averaging about 30 different volunteers per year. The Food Bank is fortunate to have adequate volunteers for day-to-day operations, but we always need more," Lisa added, "especially for special projects such as the December Can-A-Thon."

Their part-time status doesn't deter Lisa and Kim from handling each case with warmth, caring and dignity. Every client is screened by one of Athens social service agencies. The majority of the Food Bank referrals come from the Ark via individuals, churches, and community agencies. An eligible family may receive a week's worth of groceries.

Volunteers fill the bags of groceries according to family size. They are stocked with juice, canned vegetables and fruits, rice, pasta, cereals and snacks. The staff adds eggs, milk, frozen meats and bread, as well as baby food when appropriate, when clients come in.

Assembling these food packages is the first order of the day. Volunteers check the lists from Kim and begin to "shop" from stocked shelves in the warehouse for their designated family.

Tasks change from day to day. When it is necessary to buy items from a local grocery store, volunteers pick them up and stock them in the warehouse. The Food Bank must regularly purchase eggs, milk, cheese and other perishables.

Individuals and churches make up 94 percent of the financial backing for the Food Bank and businesses provide approximately 6 percent. However, grocery stores such as Publix donate food in bulk that otherwise would have to be thrown away, such as day-old bread, bakery and dessert items. The Food Bank shares fresh or perishable items with Our Daily Bread, a local soup kitchen, and as other agencies addressing hunger.

The greatest source of the canned goods comes from the annual Can-A-Thon sponsored by the Food Bank and the Salvation Army. The Can-A-Thon takes place on the first Friday in December on College Square, beginning around 6:30 a.m. and lasting until noon. In six hours, the Food Bank nets 20 percent of its canned food for the upcoming year' around six tons.

Clarke County Schools support the drive, with buses delivering food collected by students. Individuals drop off donations on their way to work. The Navy School supports the Can-A-Thon, as do many area churches. Food donations at performances of Prince Avenue Baptist Church's 'Living Christmas Tree' in December become part of the Can-A-Thon.

After the Can-A-Thon harvest, volunteers transport tons of food to the warehouse, sort it and

shelve it.

The Food Bank began with a "leap of faith," according to Ida Ziemke, who formed the first Food Bank Board along with Nancy Denson, Lois Brumby and members of the Athens Ministerial Association. A non-profit organization, the Food Bank opened its doors on December 8, 1980, with food donations stored in Nancy's garage.

Edna Seagraves was the first full-time employee. She was already a community activist, having helped start the Can-A-Thon in February 1973. When her peers were retiring, she was just gearing up for service. She actively worked at the Food Bank until 1988. "There were times when I just didn't know if we could take care of any needs, but the Lord does provide," Edna says.

At 88, Edna is still far from retirement. She has formed a partnership with Covenant Presbyterian Church. Edna prepares and serves lunch regularly for Our Daily Bread, a Monday-Friday soup kitchen housed in Oconee Street United Methodist Church. Edna and fellow senior citizens supply the manpower while Covenant Presbyterian supplies the food. Our Daily Bread is supported by a number of local churches.

The Food Bank has been functioning ever since its 1980 organization, and three of the original board members are still active. Its first home (other than Nancy's basement) was upstairs in what is now the Grit building on Prince Avenue. Nancy says there was no heat up there, and her husband gave the agency a kerosene heater for Christmas. In 1989 the board bought the property on Barber Street that is currently shared with The Ark.

Ida is quite proud that for 19 years the Food Bank has served the needs of Athens without taking any government dollars, "while treating people with dignity and love." She insists that people don't really like to ask for help but sometimes it is necessary. Her statistics back up her words, with less than 10 families asking for aid the optimum four times in any one-year.

The Athens Area Emergency Food Bank gets some items from the Northeast Georgia Food Bank, an agency that buys in bulk and distributes in Northeast Georgia and serves as a warehouse for goods such as pasta, dried food and frozen commodities, with minimal canned items.

If the Northeast Georgia Food Bank doesn't have the items on its shopping list, the Athens Food Bank must purchase things like canned tomatoes, juice, margarine, cereal, eggs, milk, crackers and peanut butter. Some grocers allow them to buy at a sizable discount; others do not.

Pricilla Sumner, chairman of the board, summed up the motto of the Food Bank: "We are here to serve. No one should go hungry." She says that many recently arrived immigrants getting established in Athens could use assistance, as could elderly people on food stamps or fixed incomes and the homeless.

People who enter the driveway read the sign for The Ark: *Borne by God's Here Promise to a Place of Hope*. The Food Bank could appropriately erect a sign: *Hope Served Daily*.

The staff and volunteers of the Athens Area Emergency Food Bank give their clients back their human dignity with encouragement and love. They serve up hope along with boxes of nutritious food, exemplifying the words of Sir Wilfred Thomas Grenfell, an English physician, who said, "The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth."

Sheila Hudson is a freelance writer living in Athens.

[sidebar information]

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES IN ATHENS

The following organizations need volunteers on a continual basis. Contact one of them for the volunteer activities that would best suit your talents, or call Community Connection at (706) 353-1313/(800) 924-5080 Monday-Friday 8:30 am-5:00 p.m.

Athens Area Emergency Food Bank
353-8182
Lisa Ganschow, Store Manager

Athens Area Homeless Shelter
354-0423
Beth O'Grady, Coordinator

Community Wide Thanksgiving Day Meal
353-1556
Joy Sims & Katie Arrowood, Coordinators

Food Bank of Northeast Georgia
354-8191
Pam White, Director

Athens Community Council on Aging
549-4850
Ann Hansen, Community Service Director

Salvation Army
543-5350
Capt. Barry Corbitt, Commanding Officer

As Rosalyn Carter stated, "Without volunteers we'd be a nation without a soul."