



Matt Goins photos

# "Give Me Your Hungry..."

By Judy L. Marchman

The people at God's Pantry Food Bank have a lot riding on what they do. Their mission is an important one — reducing hunger in Kentucky. The sad reality is that many people in the commonwealth go hungry because food is a staple they cannot afford, especially when trying to pay rent, utilities, and other expenses on meager salaries.

The statistics are alarming. In 2001 God's Pantry became the first Kentucky food bank to participate in the national study, *Hunger in America*, and from that came a *Hunger in Kentucky* study that reported the following:

- More than 120,000 persons received assistance from God's Pantry in 2001. The number continues to grow;
- 71 percent of God's Pantry clients (those receiving assistance) have an annual household income of less than \$10,000;
- 52 percent of parents needing assistance

skip meals so their children can eat

- 38 percent of households receiving assistance include children;
- 21 percent of households receiving assistance include a person 65 or older.

Figures such as these keep the God's Pantry staff and volunteers determined in their mission.

"We're working on a variety of ways of getting food to the people who need it," said Marian Blanchard, God's Pantry's executive director. "We want to distribute 15 million pounds of food a year, and we're aggressively pursuing that goal."

God's Pantry dates to 1955 when Mim Hunt, a concerned Lexingtonian, began serving food from her home's basement. Hunt had done social work in New York City, but upon returning to Lexington in 1950, she was dismayed to see slums just as bad as those in New York. Her food distribution efforts grew, and in 1979 God's Pantry was incorpo-

*God's Pantry  
Provides More  
Than Food*

rated. In 1984 the organization became an affiliate of the national America's Second Harvest food bank network.

God's Pantry, which operates as a private, non-profit organization, serves some 350 member agencies in 49 counties in central and eastern Kentucky. More than eight million pounds of food go out each year to the member agencies, which include emergency food pantries, homeless shelters, senior citizen centers, soup kitchens, and children's homes.

The organization has forged many relationships and partnerships throughout the community to help fund its mission.

"Our funding sources are very diverse. That was very appealing to me when I was looking at this job," said Blanchard, who joined God's Pantry seven years ago. "It's frightening to me when non-profits overly depend on one source."

God's Pantry receives its largest source of income from direct mail campaigns with several mailings a year. In 2003 God's Pantry took in \$1.4 million, with 34 percent coming from individual donations. Financial donations help with operation costs, food pur-



Executive Director Marian Blanchard stands by a bin containing 1,200 pounds of donated items in the God's Pantry warehouse.

chases, and the many programs and services God's Pantry provides. In addition, the member agencies pay a shared maintenance fee (up to 14 cents per pound of product) for the food they receive. The fee helps defray costs incurred in transporting food to and from the God's Pantry warehouse in Lexington.

The organization receives food items pri-

marily from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Commodity Supplemental Food Program and America's Second Harvest, but many essentials come through local food drives, corporate donations, and area farmers. In 2003 food drives brought in more than 300,000 pounds of food. Food drives are usually most prominent during the winter holiday season (the 2003 Fall Food Drive brought in 101,318 pounds of food), but food is needed all year.

In Lexington, God's Pantry serves five food pantries, which are open Monday through Friday. The pantries are located near or in the areas of town where more people have need of them. In addition, the Fayette County Emergency Food Box Program, to which Keeneland has been a major contributor, gets food to individuals or families who have been referred by a local social service agency, such as the Salvation Army, the Hope Center, Lexington Housing Authority, etc. About a thousand clients are served each month. A client can receive a food box up to three times within a six-month period. A typical food box for a family of four contains an estimated \$105 worth of food. Among the items in the box are two packages of meat; a dozen eggs; canned vegetables, fruit, and soup; pasta, cereal, rice, flour, and dry beans; dry milk; margarine; bread; baby food (if needed); and condiments, coffee and tea, and cookies. According to a survey conducted earlier this year by God's Pantry, this box of food will last the family an average of 12 days.

With food constantly coming in and out, God's Pantry began to outgrow its original warehouse on South Forbes Road. After 10 years at that location, God's Pantry moved to a larger facility on Jaggie Fox Way in 1999.

The combination warehouse and office complex, an impressive, 46,000-square-foot structure, expanded an existing building that had served as an overflow warehouse. That existing structure became the office and training complex, and the actual warehouse, itself 33,700 square feet, includes four loading docks, a freezer and refrigerated unit, and a three-tier racking system. A salvage and repacking room, sponsored by Keeneland,

## PICNIC WITH THE PUPS

The Bluegrass Animal Welfare League's annual Picnic with the Pups takes place Sept. 19 (rain date Sept. 26) at Keeneland. Activities include contests for best tricks, best-dressed pet, and best picnic set-up. Obedience and agility competitions also are featured. Jack Pattie of WVLK Radio and Barbara Bailey of WKYT-TV are the masters of ceremony. Admission is \$5 for adults; children under 10 are admitted free. Proceeds benefit the league's humane education and spay/neuter programs.



Virginia Morris, BAWL director.



Volunteer Jeremy Willis with two greyhounds available for adoption through Greyhound Rescue.



A best-dressed competitor.



A live band entertains participants and spectators.



A customer (left) is assisted by sisters Nina Tuttle (center) and Cam Weir (right) at the God's Pantry Food Bank at Pilgrim Baptist Church at 541 Jefferson St. in Lexington. This bank has been in operation more than 20 years.

keeps food items damaged in transport separate until volunteers can sort through the items to determine what is salvageable.

Volunteers sort and box donated food at the warehouse. The food then goes on pallets, where it awaits pickup by member agencies. The racks

are also filled with pallets of donated food from manufacturers such as Nabisco and Kellogg's and from companies such as Kroger. Other racks are filled with food items from the USDA Commodity Supplemental Food Program. Eligible member agencies do not pay the shared maintenance fee on commodities, which can include canned goods as well as fresh produce and fruit. Produce also comes from local farmers or farmers' markets and is always needed because of the quick turnaround on such items.

In addition to the Lexington warehouse, God's Pantry has a warehouse in Prestonsburg that serves the 10 eastern-most counties. The Mobile Pantry program, which is about two years old, serves counties where there is

only one or no food pantries and helps organizations in those counties develop their own food pantry programs. Among the counties that have participated or are currently participating in the Mobile Pantry are Jessamine, Lincoln, Boyle, Bath, Leslie, and Johnson.

Another popular program is Kids' Café, which provides evening meals to children in at-risk neighborhoods. Begun about six years ago, Kids' Café supplements the school system's free or reduced-price breakfast/lunch program and also provides a safe, fun place for children to go after school.

"Talk to any teacher within a high poverty population and he or she will have many stories of children in their classrooms that are going hungry," said Blanchard. A survey of children attending Kids' Cafes conducted by Brandeis University's Center on Hunger and Poverty showed that two-thirds of the children polled reported feeling better, receiving better grades, and having increased concentration and energy after going to Kids' Cafes. Six Kids' Cafes are in operation in Fayette County, with two in Harlan County and one in Clark County.

Nutrition education is another program that God's Pantry offers to low-income families to help them make better nutritional and economical choices and put good nutrition

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into practice. The program, called "S.T.A.R.S (Skills to Achieve Real Success) in the Kitchen," includes workshops on lifestyle changes, meal preparation, nutrition, and food budgeting. More than 500 people have graduated from the program since it began nine years ago.

At the heart of all of God's Pantry's programs and operations are the volunteers. Some 2,300 volunteers help each year with various activities. Volunteers sort and box food, man food pantries, help at the Kids' Café, take referral calls from social service agencies, and so on. Volunteers range from individuals to church and youth groups to businesses. Each quarter, God's Pantry holds a family volunteer night, and certain groups are regulars, such as the "Salvage Saints" from St. Michael's Episcopal Church who help in the salvage/repacking room.

Susan Nicholson, wife of Keeneland President Nick Nicholson, has volunteered at the Nathaniel Mission food pantry on DeRoode Street for some 10 years.

"God's Pantry is close to my heart. The part I enjoy the most is being face to face with the clients, particularly the senior citizens. You feel like you've done something for someone," said Nicholson. "I think that's what is so wonderful about God's Pantry — they get directly involved with the people they are trying to help. You feel they are making people's lives better."

Volunteers also help with various fund-raising events, such as the popular Taste of the Bluegrass, held this year on June 4 at the Keeneland Entertainment Center. Participants partook of food from more than 50 local restaurants, while 80 percent of the proceeds benefited God's Pantry. God's Pantry also hosts "What's Cooking?", a series of cooking classes with some of Lexington's top chefs, with funds going to the nutrition education programs.

In an effort to build community awareness, God's Pantry holds "Food for Thought" lunches at its facility. Donations are not solicited at these hour-long lunches; the goal is help people learn more about the hunger situation in Kentucky and see God's Pantry's

operation and warehouse firsthand.

"In affluent America many people don't realize there are so many going without food in their own community," said Blanchard.

But people in central and eastern Kentucky have hope, thanks to God's Pantry. 🐾

For more information about God's Pantry, go to [www.godspantry.org](http://www.godspantry.org).

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