

Published: Apr 07, 2010 02:00 AM  
Modified: Apr 05, 2010 05:13 PM

Kids volunteer to help the hungry

BY ANDREW KENNEY, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Even in a cavernous warehouse, tiny hands can help.

Every two weeks, dozens of children speed the flow of tons of food from donors to hungry people by volunteering at the Food Bank of Eastern and Central North Carolina's distribution center.

The kids, who often come with groups such as the Brownies or YMCA Y-Guides or Indian Princesses, do the same simple but vital work as most Food Bank volunteers. With a few basic instructions to remember, they help the food bank's small staff sort the huge stacks of food that arrive by the truckload.

"Do y'all know what Ramen Top Noodles are?" Jim Rasmussen, warehouse coordinator, asked a cluster of youngsters on a recent Saturday, as he pointed out where to bring the packaged noodles.

A few pointers later - put soups here, canned food there, check for holes and dented lids - and the swarm of pre-pre-teens and parents was ready to go. "There's only one other requirement," Rasmussen said. "You gotta have fun."

Maddy Flowers, 8, of Wake Forest laughed as she grabbed every box of spaghetti she could find, and Drew Bond, 8, of Cary wore a huge smile even as he hefted a package of noodles half his size.

In just two hours on this afternoon, the 50-odd kids and parents prepared 8,000 pounds of food for distribution to the



Mallory McCormick, 7, and a fellow volunteer load up on cans during a food sort last month.

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partner agencies that get it to those in need.

Kristin and Ken Gross of Cary helped organize two of the volunteer groups, the Brownies and YMCA Guides, because they wanted their children to learn about helping others.

"We're trying to teach them early that there are these opportunities, and that some people are less fortunate," said Ken Gross, whose children have also volunteered at an animal shelter and local churches.

"I've never seen them hustle this much, and here they are helping people," Kristin Gross said as kids buzzed around the room with arms full of apricots, ginger ale, pancake mix.

More people of all ages have been volunteering, and increased demand has led the Food Bank to add a second monthly day aimed at kids.

In February 2008, about 900 people volunteered at the warehouse, while this February brought 1,200 helpers. And over the past few years, the kids' day program has become so popular that it grew a waiting list. Rasmussen sees the increase in volunteerism as a reflection of more visible economic problems.

"Parents are taking a bigger interest in showing their kids about giving back," he said.

All together, volunteers sort about half of all food that passes through the Raleigh warehouse and tally more than 177,000 collective work hours per year. More than 1,000 people help at the building each month, giving the food bank the muscle to handle large donations that smaller agencies sometimes can't.

Briana Gambler, a third-grader from Wake Forest, thinks those extra volunteers made the Saturday sort more fun -- and a lot easier.

"If it was, like, five or six people, it'd be kind of hard," she said.

By the end of the session, she and the others were buzzing gleefully from box to pallet, arms full of food. Without fail, they said they were happy to do good.

"You're not just sitting," said Zac El Jaouhari. "It's pretty nice to help people."

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