



FISH Hospitality Pantries Press

We Are Strong Together



Northwest Pantry Coordinator Emma Ellis-Cosigua lifts up our hospitality values as she leads the morning meeting.

As we approach the 39th anniversary of FISH Hospitality Pantries in September, we take time to reflect on the values that have guided us in our development over the years.

It all began in East Knoxville with 100 bags of food and has grown to more than 7,000 food bags a month from four locations, becoming the largest food operation providing food assistance to families in East Tennessee. We believe our underpinning values of hospitality--non-judgmental welcome, inclusion, and diversity--are responsible for our success.

Back in 1986, the FISH Hotline Delivery Service was the main resource for families needing food assistance. Staffed by committed volunteers in area churches, the hotline was on fire six days a week, as many people tried over and over again to access the service. Jim Wright, who had been volunteering in food relief for years, realized that a walk-in pantry on a bus line in an area close to housing projects where there was a concentration of poverty would benefit many families. **That first pantry was originally named the Last Resort Pantry, as it was a pantry people could access as often as they needed without set limits or boundaries.**

I was working part time at Second Harvest in those days, and part of my responsibility was to visit pantries in eighteen counties which were members and could purchase food from the Second Harvest Share Food Bank. When I asked how often families could visit pantries, the response was usually three times a year or every ninety days. Over and over, again, I heard that people would need to go somewhere else for ongoing assistance. The problem was there was no place else, and people were looked down on and were called "double-dippers" for trying to access more than one pantry to feed their children.

Jim Wright took to heart the Gospel story of the loaves and fishes, believing that the miracle happened during the giving.

Not so with the Last Resort Pantry, which operated on a vision of abundance, not scarcity. Jim Wright took to heart the Gospel story of the loaves and fishes, believing that the miracle happened during the giving. He felt that how often a family should visit a food pantry should be determined by families themselves. Only they would know what was needed for their families.

So, when pantry items were low, the FISH team "thinned the soup," and let the Knoxville community know of the need, and the response was overwhelming. Never did the pantry run out of food. Within just a few years, he opened neighborhood pantries in South and Northwest Knoxville serving the growing numbers of families who came from all parts of the county and beyond. Donations supported the new pantries in record numbers and by the end of the century, we had more food donations than we had space for, which led to the building of the Northwest FISH Hospitality Pantry and Warehouse.

The determining factors of the success of Hospitality Pantries ultimately have been our values for

inclusiveness and diversity, and the underpinning faith vision of all religions that every person was created by God with dignity, and that we are all part of a common humanity. Over the years, our understanding of that truth has increased. Not only does it apply to our guests and who we serve, but also to those who step up to

serve our pantry guests. Indeed, a significant part of our success has been the diversity of our pantry volunteers and supporters who come from every racial and ethnic background, religious tradition, and many geographic areas. The value of their insights cannot be overstated.



Guests selecting food items on the Northwest Pantry Pavillion

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We receive volunteer and financial support from more than 40 area churches. Our volunteers are from all walks of life and economic circumstances, and a third of our pantry volunteers first came to one of our pantries for food assistance. The respect and welcome they received made them want to be part of the mission.

This spirited mix of volunteers have also contributed as participants and leaders in our many community programs like Mosaic, the Women's Community School and You Teach Me, I Teach You, that we have developed as part of the Hospitality Pantries vision.

A high school science teacher participating in our Mosaic workshop once told us that if you were in a lifeboat in the sea, your best chances for survival would be heightened by the diversity in the boat. Both ecological and sociological studies illustrate the likely truth of that statement. A diverse group brings together a greater range of individual strengths, skills, and perspectives, making them more adaptable and resilient to the unpredictable dangers of being lost at sea.



We are grateful for an abundance of food from our many donors which we can offer our pantry guests.

Similarly, a diverse ecosystem is more likely to withstand environmental changes or challenges because there are a broader range of adaptations and abilities within the different species. And in the "ecosystem" of our pantries, a group of people with diverse skills, knowledge, and perspectives is better equipped to handle unexpected situations and challenges. Sociological studies on group dynamics demonstrate that diverse groups often exhibit a wider range of problem-solving approaches and innovative thinking.

Central to our understanding of the success of the FISH Hospitality Pantries Neighborhood Pantries is our understanding that the work we do here in East Tennessee with one another is the work of our Creator. We are



Young Volunteers offer a variety of produce to guests at Northwest Pantry.

humbled by the words of Psalm 8, that God who in his mighty power has arranged the moon and the stars, and gifted us with a beautiful creation, has presented us with and entrusted us with the work of caring for our home and for all of our brothers and sisters. But we know that God is always with us and continues to help us understand that we are strong together.

Beth Carroll Hunley,
Director of Development and Community Programs



Many University of Tennessee students volunteer at our neighborhood pantries.

FISH Hospitality Pantries Mission Influences

Before the organization of FISH Hospitality Pantries, I volunteered with a food relief organization that had a blackball list of 100 families they would not serve. Families were placed on this list for infractions like having beer cans in their yards, or calling for assistance more than six times a year.

Over time, I visited most of these families to get a sense of their circumstances. I came to believe that if anyone could see and hear what I encountered during these visits, they would not begrudge these families receiving food assistance.

Societal norms can persist for generations, but when we look more closely, some conceal grave unkindness and unjustness. The God who created us does not create some people and say, "No food for you!" Our community is too affluent to allow some of its members to go hungry.

At our pantries, we say that the way we treat our guests is as nourishing as the food we share with them.

At our pantries, we say that the way we treat our guests is as nourishing as the food we share with them. Why are we taught to be kind to our enemies, even to love them? To suspend judgment gives unmerited compassion and softens and heals hearts. When that is our mission, we cannot be taken advantage of by anyone no matter the affront to us.

When we pass on to people at FISH Hospitality Pantries (and anywhere else) the undeserved love we receive from God, we are united with God in his spirit that nourishes and frees people at the deepest levels of human experience. It becomes more than serving others. It's the nourishment every person needs most—and to participate in revealing it with others deepens our own healing experience of it.

Jim Wright,

Director of FISH Hospitality Pantries



Juliette McLendon, East Pantry Volunteer, offering canned goods and a friendly smile to guests who visit East Pantry on Wednesday



A young child walks past the bread display with his BOOST bag in hand.



FISH Banner

“Love Everybody,” says Wilma Stacy

It is Monday morning on the east side of town, and there are many tasks for Pantry Coordinator Wilma Stacy to oversee before gathering her “very, very, very, very responsible team” for prayer. There are trucks to unload, and food items to be placed into one of the pantry’s back rooms. Together with TeTe (Regina Farris), who has already made the coffee, Wilma will be checking on what food items are available and then see that the items are set up on the service line.

Once the team members are called to morning prayer, and Wilma thanks the Lord for this day, for these committed volunteers who staff the pantry on Monday, and for the guests who will visit the pantry, the welcoming of guests will begin.

Afterwards, Josephine Hagan will take her place at the door where she will greet each guest and family, and TeTe will deliver the BOOST bags to Josephine so they will be ready to present to the children when they arrive. Near the front desk where folks sign in, Monty Harris will take up his post at the front of the line to invite guests to select what items they would like from the variety of meat and canned vegetables and fruits offered today.

Around the corner Anthony Cates and other volunteers have set up fresh fruits, vegetables, and various kinds of bread on the line and outside the building. Tony Hagan is ready to man a station of rice and pasta while Herman Drew will be in charge of restocking.

Only then can Wilma take a break here and there from her duties to talk about her work and how she feels about it.

Wilma is feeling particularly happy this morning and blessed, because they have received a huge donation of canned food and dry goods from Caliber Collision. “They first came with a car and a van. Then they came back again with the van.”

Wilma’s husband, George. (to whom she was wed more than sixty years ago) introduced her to the pantry work a number of years before his death.

George had joined the volunteer staff at East Pantry after his retirement, along with fellow retirees Herbert Donaldson and Daniel Banks, all of them members of Logan Temple A.M.E. Zion Church.



Volunteer TeTe Farris and Monday Coordinator, Wilma Stacy, at the East Pantry

In addition to being part of the East Hospitality Pantry Council, for which he was treasurer, and working to distribute food at the pantry, at some point George began driving one of the FISH trucks to pick up donated food. After a few years, Wilma Stacy joined her husband as part of the team.

She started on the truck with George and later went on to work at the 17th Street Pantry until it was replaced in 2007 by the Northwest Hospitality Pantry/Warehouse, where she also volunteered.

When asked what this work has meant to her and what has kept her here for so many years, she immediately answers, “The people! The people have kept me. **I see people on the street. They always tell me that they are so glad that the pantry is where it is! (and that feels so good!)** The week before last I

had this lady stop me at a store and tell me that she was so grateful.”

The volunteers echo Wilma’s sentiment with their own perspectives. TeTe says, “I do the inventory--the fruit, vegetables, and canned goods to be set out.” At the end of the day she communicates with the Northwest warehouse staff to let them know some of the needs for the following pantry

workdays. **TeTe says what keeps her here “are the smiling faces,” of the guests.** “I enjoy talking to the people.” She remembers how she used to help her Nanny and her grandfather and her mom, all of whom have now passed. Somehow, her work at the East Pantry is reminiscent of the help she was able to give her own family.

Being pleasant to the people in the line is a must, according to Wilma. Before the pantry opens, she says, “I tell the volunteers, and I tell myself, ‘You treat the people like you want to be treated. No matter how they come into this pantry—you give

**It’s just a family thing.
We’re all working together.
If it wasn’t for the volunteers,
we couldn’t make it.
So, the volunteers are our
backbone. They really are
the backbone.”**

them a smile, 'cause you don't know what they are going through. They don't know what we're going through, but you treat them with love. Love everybody, love everybody, regardless of what is going on."

Wilma's own gratitude is evident when she talks about her process at the pantry. "When I get here in the morning, I usually check around to see what I have, then I go around and see what needs to go on

the line. The volunteers help me. It's just a family thing. We're all working together. If it wasn't for the volunteers, we couldn't make it. So, the volunteers are our backbone. They really are the backbone."

Laughing, she says, "I'm not even going to tell you how long I've been at the pantry, 'cause I might tell you my age." Of course, we all already know her age because we were at her special birthday party some years back. But we are not telling!

East Pantry Report by Wednesday Coordinator, Kathy Weston

Every Wednesday afternoon after East Pantry closes for the day, Wednesday Coordinator Kathy Weston writes a report about the day. Kathy, a volunteer for 17 years, has a knack for creating informative and inspiring reports, which frequently feature anecdotes about interactions with guests and volunteers, and we always feel grateful when we read them. We are sharing excerpts from a couple of Kathy's reports, to give a sense of the East Pantry community.

East Pantry Report, Winter 2025

Another great day at East Pantry! Today we offered coffee, tea, canned goods, our core dry items, eggs, and milk. We offered beautiful fruits and vegetables outside, chips, and an assortment of breads. In acknowledgment of Black History Month, in our morning meeting we talked about Dr. Martin Luther King, and how his fight for justice was for all people, and how his beliefs paired with our core values—that all people who come to our pantries are treated with dignity and respect no matter our different beautiful colors, cultures, and backgrounds. The legacy of FISH Hospitality Pantries will live on and will always be a light that leads our guests and volunteers to a place of peace, understanding, and warmth.

So, as we join hands with our community and each other, may we continue to embrace our differences and celebrate the fact that we together can create positive change.

Blessings,
Kathy



Wednesday Coordinator, Kathy Weston, at the East Pantry



East Pantry Wednesday Volunteer, Terry Edwards, displays a variety of canned vegetables from which pantry guests can select.

East Pantry Report, Summer 2025

Another great day at East Pantry! Today we offered coffee, tea, our core dry items, an assortment of canned goods, an assortment of meat, and eggs. Our guests were so happy about the eggs—they could not believe it. We also offered an assortment of breads and sweets, frozen banana pudding base, and beautiful fruits and vegetables. We prayed for Texas with Pastor Riddle today, and, as usual, he said a wonderful prayer. Officer Clemmons came by, and it was so good to see her. I was going through some old books and papers and I found something that I wrote to our guests [in 2009] after I had been with the pantry one year, and I quote: **To our guests—We see you as a lifeline saving us from just everyday concerns—you bring us an opportunity to learn and grow, and through you, God's love and nurturing comes alive in us and causes us to bring forth the fruits of love, patience, self-control, joy, peace, and compassion. Yes, you bring gifts to us that are a blessing and a privilege. We say thank you for making our journey sweet and memorable.**

Blessings always,
Kathy

A Collective Thank You to Our Donors-- and Publication Dedication to our Guests who give us their trust, Volunteers who give us their time, and Donors who provide financial support



We are fortunate to have employees from local businesses and organizations volunteer at our neighborhood pantries.

The other strong contributing factor to our long-term ability to provide food assistance for hungry families is without a doubt the generosity of our many donors. Past and present contributions from individuals, businesses, churches, and foundations have more than kept us afloat; they have enabled us to make a real impact on hunger in our community and the surrounding counties. To say we are grateful is an understatement. Our words cannot really describe the gratitude and joy we feel at being able to offer food to any person or family who needs it as often as they need it without limitations or judgment. And it is all because of you: whether you have donated food or financial support once or monthly or yearly, you have helped your neighbors.

Our Christmas Gift Card project again received record donations. And the children of many of our guests enjoyed generous Christmas gifts from parishioners of All Saints Catholic Church, Episcopal Church of Ascension, and Gloria Dei Lutheran Church.

Additionally, many foundations have granted our organization tremendous support which has allowed us to purchase thousands of pounds of nutritious food items to ensure that we have food that supplies all the nutrients that families and children need to thrive. We also have received generous support from charitable foundations for our community programs.

That said, we offer a collective thank you to all who have supported FISH Hospitality Pantries in whatever way they could. And we dedicate this year's publication to our guests who come to us with trust, bless us, and pray for us; to our volunteers who give us their time and friendship; and to the donors and foundations who make it all possible with their generous contributions.

The following is a list of some of the foundations that have awarded grants to FISH Hospitality Pantries in 2024 and 2025.

**Akima | Arby's Foundation | Boyd Foundation
Melrose Foundation | Monday Foundation
East Tennessee Foundation / Mount Rest Foundation
Family Foundation | The Jane L. Pettway Foundation
Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Benevolence Fund
The Thompson Charitable Foundation
Variety Foundation of Eastern Tennessee
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Y-12 FCU Gives Foundation**

Recently, the Variety Foundation invited us to a check presentation for the organizations, with

programs benefitting children to which they are awarding support this year. After the presentations and the picture taking, Carol Fusco, Variety Executive Director, encouraged the guests to get to know each other since we all work to ensure the best for the children of our communities. That suggestion resonated with us as we know the value of connecting with others who share our values for ensuring the health and well-being of children and families in our communities and beyond.

That said, we offer a collective thank you to all who have supported FISH Hospitality Pantries in whatever way they could. And we dedicate this year's publication to our guests who come to us with trust, bless us, and pray for us; to our volunteers who give us their time and friendship; and to the donors and foundations who make it all possible with their generous contributions.



Children picnicking with nutritious, kid-friendly snacks on the side of the Northwest front food display area. Often the children dig into their BOOST bags and begin eating yogurt pushups, cheese sticks or fruits right away.

Behind the Scenes with David Lovett

David Lovett's volunteer commitment to FISH spans decades. Over forty years ago, David and his wife, Ellen, volunteered as part of the Episcopal Church of Ascension FISH team to deliver groceries in response to families requesting food assistance. So, when Jim Wright, Founder and Director of FISH Hospitality Pantries, opened the first of the FISH neighborhood pantries in September 1986, in East Knoxville at Magnolia Ave. United Methodist Church, **David was there on Day One. And he has been volunteering with the pantries ever since.**

David quickly took to the spirit of the pantries, which was one of welcoming and nonjudgment of guests who visited and of giving food to every person who came to the pantry as often as they needed it.

For the next 20 years, David volunteered every week at the East Pantry and eventually at the 17th Street Pantry. Along the way, his exchanges with the guests who visited the pantries deepened his commitment. "I got to see the look on someone's face when they received that bag of food" [and hear], "thank you. God bless you—you don't know what it means to my family."

David is now Food Supply Director and spends most of his time at the newest addition built to accommodate the large donations of food FISH receives that opened last year, the warehouse annex (at 236 Scott Street) a block down from the Northwest Pantry/Warehouse. The short answer for why David has volunteered for such a passage of time, he says is that "God called me here," **In his heart, he believes that everything in his life before he began his work with FISH and everything since has prepared him for "for what I feel called to do" in his long-term service with FISH.**

When the new Northwest Pantry/Warehouse was in the works and scheduled to open in 2007, David realized that moving from a couple of borrowed rooms as they had been operating to thousands of square feet of space was going to require oversight and management. Someone was going to have to look out for that infrastructure and take care of what goes on behind the scenes. After some discussion, Jim Wright asked David to consider taking care of that, and "that's what [he has] done ever since."

David's prior work experience prepared him for what he would be doing in his new role of warehouse management. "I had done backstage work with a theater, and I worked in an art gallery. I worked in a small business, and I learned about organizing.

"People have different gifts, and everybody has got things that energize them, and I've always loved problem solving. I love puzzles and games and



David Lovett's gift for music informs his work at the Northwest Pantry/Warehouse. A talented banjo and guitar player who began playing with a band in his teens, David learned about rhythm and how it connects the tone (and harmony) of the music. Now he applies this to his work at the pantry as he oversees warehouse operations: a rhythmic underpinning connects the many factors to create a harmonious result.

things like that. And so, organizing things behind the scene lets me do that on a bigger scale than just filling out the daily crossword, which I still do.

"I learned to operate a forklift and began to come in contact with a network of people that Jim had put together consisting of food donors and food suppliers and volunteer truck drivers.

"Most of our volunteers are in my generation," David stresses. "If you are not retired, then you can't do this, because you are busy at the time when FISH needs things done which is usually on weekday mornings.

"Through a series of stages, I had sort of gradually acquired the portfolio that I have now. For example, Jim was ordering food on a weekly basis from Second Harvest, and he decided to take a sabbatical and asked if I would do that while he was gone, and I've been doing it ever since. There were several tasks I acquired at that time, and there were other tasks that I acquired because the person that was doing it needed to move on for some reason. So, that had to do with scheduling."

David depends on people like Steve Dail and John Seivers whose job "it is to get the food out into the community, (to empty out the warehouse). **My job is to fill the warehouse up.** I work a lot with procurement, and we have a number of businesses that donate food to us—some of it is on a daily basis. Some of it is on a weekly basis and some are on an industrial scale. **Some of the donors are Fortune 500 companies. Some of them are gardeners or small farms, and some of them are families—a child will come and bring a jar of peanut butter.** Then we have food drives. So, I

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have gotten involved with in sort of the newest part which I find to be the most exciting part of what I am doing.

“Anybody who knows me, will tell you that I love to start projects, but once they get to where they are kind of running smoothly, I am looking for the next thing, and it’s really important that an organization like ours has people who can maintain the momentum and just keep doing their job every week.” Joe Johnston, for example, drives to Trader Joe’s each week. “[He] comes down here and gets a truck and goes there and gets a thousand pounds of food. He does that every Wednesday. We need lots of people like that.”

What energizes David are partnerships. “There are probably three kinds of these that I am engaged with every day—the most fundamental is the one is



the one we have with our volunteer team” which “is always shifting, because we are aging (and some of us have to have knee surgery or move to where our grandchildren are—some of us pass away. There are all sorts of reasons that we have to find new team members, so that is part of the work, and every time there is one of these transitions the schedule has to be shuffled, so there’s that puzzle for me to do.”

David mentions the partnerships FISH has with companies that donate food. “We wouldn’t be able to do what we are doing without the generosity of companies like Sara Lee, Cosco, Trader Joe’s, H.T. Hackney, The Ruby Foods and a bunch of others.”

In his mind, he says, he calls them “the Hundred Ton Club, because these companies have the capacity to donate a hundred tons of food a year.

“And we have some wonderful volunteers who kind of specialize in that area either picking up food or just calling, sending information, telling our story to the people in our community who are to donate that food.”

Describing the third group of partners—the newest part, which David says he is really excited about, he says, “We found that some of the industrial donors were giving us so much food so fast that we

couldn’t possibly distribute all of it to our guests,” despite the fact that **“every day there is a line at one of our pantries, and we don’t stop serving until all of our guests are served, and we have given what we can to every person in the line, but somehow there’s still more.”**

“So, if we get a donation of 40 tons of coffee or we get thousands and thousands of units of bread and baked goods or a tractor trailer load of bottled drinks of iced tea and things like that,” David says, **“one of the fun things that happens,” is that FISH Hospitality Pantries can share with other area food relief programs in the surrounding region.** He points out that some of these programs “are just around the corner and some of them come from 50-60-70 miles away, and some of them come to see us once a month or a couple of times, and some of them come every week. . . . One of the fun things that happens to me is that some of these people by being in partnership with us have learned about each other, and so now there is friendship.”

FISH has a history of creating community as well as working together, and it continues with these newest partnerships. “One of these agencies will be picking up. Someone’s got a truck pulled over, loading up some bread; another truck pulls in next to them and it turns out they know each other or they used to or one of them used to work with the same agency. The people that are called to feeding ministries are going to find a place to plug in. **There’s hunger everywhere in this world and there’s response, and so if people move from Newport to Morristown, they might move to a different agency, and that’s how some of these cross-pollination things kind of happen.”**

David says that it is a two-way street with a lot of the ministry partners, like God’s Warehouse in Morristown, which David found out about through the Society of St. Andrew when he was expecting a shipment of broccoli which would be “way more than we could handle.” In speaking with his St. Andrews contact in Nashville, he learned about God’s Warehouse in Morristown which was able to take some of the broccoli. (In addition to other ministries in the region God’s Warehouse ships world-wide for disaster relief and has sent shipping containers as far away as Ukraine.) In turn, God’s Warehouse has shared bottled water and canned goods with FISH pantries.

David is always on the lookout for additional volunteers. He often finds them among “the newly minted retirees. Often, they have moved to Knoxville to be near grandchildren and are ready to do something for the rest of their lives that involves giving back or it may be somebody who has grown up in Knoxville, and they have just finished working.

“We have a whole bunch of people who have joined

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us in the last five years . . . [and] they have become the backbone of our team.”

Of the trademark diversity of FISH Hospitality Pantries in regard to background, race, or ethnicity, David says, “I will say that it is not necessarily what drew me to FISH, but that’s what I found when I came into this ministry: people who were different from me from different backgrounds, nationalities, different circumstances.” All were learning to put the differences behind them to work together.

And the conversations along the way were part of David’s own development. “There’s no question in my mind that that’s made me a better person. This been nothing but positive for me, is to find the value of all sorts of people who are different for me in all sorts of ways.”

As he reflects on the community building at FISH Hospitality Pantries, he reminisces on his earlier years in life that and what he has learned from past experiences and how they relate now to what he has experienced in his years at FISH. A talented banjo player and guitarist, David began playing in a band when he was only 16. He grew up in a music-loving family and his paternal grandmother was a professional pianist.

“I played music in a band, and the band events that we would play at would be like weddings and church socials and stuff like that, but mostly folk dancing—contra dancing.

“So, what are you actually doing?” he asks rhetorically. “Number One, you are serving. You are delivering something that is of benefit—that gives joy to others. That’s always been the reason that I thought music belongs in this world—is to give joy to others. But the other thought is that you are working, if you are in a tight band, by coordinating what you are doing with what other people are doing and listening to them and feeding off of and feeding back into the rhythm and the harmony, and the things that the group puts together in the mix, then it lifts off.

“If it goes well, then it is just unbelievably fulfilling and satisfying, and those are things that we need to do here as members of FISH team, we need to listen to each other and to feed energy into existence and to take energy out to give joy.”

David adds, “I was into sailing for a while.” When he was getting started, he asked himself, “what does a sailor do?

“Well, you put up your sails, and the wind comes along, and you fly across the bay, and it’s the most perfect day. The wind’s coming just the right way, and it takes you just where you want to go. And that’s not how the real world works, and I learned from those years that what a real sailor does is discern what is going on around you and adapt yourself to create the best outcome based on that. You adapt your actions to the environment, and you make the best of whatever is going on.”

He compares this to his work at the pantry/warehouse. “The food is not uniform.” Although there is always enough, **“I use the analogy of the tides; sometimes the water is rushing in, and sometimes, the water is rushing out, and it the same thing with our food supply. Sometimes we have great abundance, and sometimes we’re scrambling to meet the needs in front of us.”**

He goes on to share something all who work with FISH have discovered soon after coming to the work which he calls “the worst kept secret— That by coming to volunteer and give, we all receive, in fact, at the least as much as we feel we’ve given away. If you spend an hour giving, you feel like you get two hours back.”

David sums up by pointing out that there are two sides to the work he is about in the food ministry, and how he contributes to FISH. “I’ve talked about . . . the puzzle side—the problem-solving side working out logistics and details and kind of organizing. The space in the warehouse to organize the movement of food within our network, and that sort of thing. But there’s also the people side. I love people, and I always loved any form of communication and language. I grew up with an English teacher. I’ve always

liked conversation, so as I’ve matured, I want every conversation to be something positive, so I enjoy the interaction that I have in all the partnerships and in the communities that we are dealing with. And just to put it out there, I get a lot of thank you’s as everybody involved with FISH does. And you feel good, and there’s nothing wrong with it.”

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The main reason that David volunteers springs from his faith tradition. He reminds us of the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, in which Jesus describes the Final Judgment, teaching his followers the necessity of responding to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and all those in need. He ends by telling them, *“Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”*

David concludes, “That is the scripture I live by.”

Southern Hospitality at Its Finest



Lauren Mohundro shucking corn at South Pantry

In the South, we are known for our hospitality. And according to the guests who visit our FISH neighborhood pantries, our hospitality values are strongly embraced by pantry volunteers. Folks who visit our pantries can expect to be welcomed and offered respect and refreshment.

Visitors to the South FISH Pantry in Vestal experience Southern Hospitality at its finest, as we saw on a recent Friday.

Arriving at South Pantry, we are welcomed by the smiling faces--volunteers at the desk and on the line as well as some of the guests as they leave. When Pantry Coordinator Ted Mohundro spots us, we are greeted with a handshake and a healthy dose of Vitamin H (Ted's term for a bear hug).

In addition to his various coordinating duties, **Ted has cooked a hot meal for homeless guests, whom pantry volunteers call "travelers."** Nearby, a young woman enjoys today's fare: chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and a croissant. Soon several other travelers appear and take their seats for the meal.

At the side of the room, Lauren Mohundro shucks corn (grown by a local farmer) to go on the line, and Shawn Holden joins her after providing some information to the travelers on additional resources they may be able to access locally.

Shawn has been a South pantry volunteer for about five years. She first came with her mother, Marlene Krzak, a member of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, who passed away in early June. Shawn moved here from Utah after her mother's diagnosis with Alzheimer's.

Shawn tells us about her loss, and the connection of her mother and the South Pantry, and the love story that surrounds the pantry.

When volunteers take time away from their work at the pantry to discuss their pantry service, often themes like the "God factor" and love emerge in their stories--knowing somehow that they are where

God means for them to be, and the love they find in their work.

Shawn, a social worker and psychology major, says that compassion is her great gift from God, and it was her mother who instilled in her the practice of living it out.

"I got involved because my mom was coming here with her church, Gloria Dei. I was bringing her, and so I started coming, and we just fell in love with the service Ted was doing here.

"They treat people with so much dignity. I like the fact that they call them travelers instead of homeless. It gives them a bit more dignity, and everybody needs that especially when they are down and out.

"In memory of my mom, we bought a washer and dryer so they could start doing laundry for the homeless population."

Shawn, who works as a contractor for Social Security, reporting on court cases for people who are trying to get their benefits, has followed her mother's tradition in raising her own now-grown son, volunteering with him at the homeless shelters where she wrote resumes for homeless people to help them obtain work.

Soon after her mother's passing, Shawn returned to the South Pantry, "because I needed to feel better about me, and that was something my mom and I had in common. When I was growing up, we always had a bag in the car" for people who were in need, she remembers.

Lauren Mohundro concurs with Shawn's sentiment, adding that we are all in this together, "so we have to help one another." Lauren, who has worked beside her husband, Ted, for the past seven years, has a special interest in gardening. Last year she worked in the garden at the Sustainable Future Center where the pantry space is located, sharing the center's harvests with pantry guests. This year, she has been gardening at home, planting tomatoes and onions to share.

As we talk, additional travelers arrive to savor the hot meal. One regular--whom Ted introduces as Uncle Jesse--seems particularly thankful and appears happy to have his photo taken as he enjoys his meal. As other guests join him, we move on to talk to other volunteers.

Ann Harvey is on staff at the Sustainable Future Center and is a mainstay at South Pantry. She details the latest on the SFC gardens, which have had to share much of their produce with groundhogs and rabbits. They have been working on the problem with some fencing. Recently,

though, Ann spotted a rabbit inside the fencing. “So, we had either caged in the rabbit, and it was enjoying the good life, or it had found its way under the fence,” she laments. Still, she reports that there are several gardeners who are growing produce like mustard and turnip greens and beets, and that their harvest appears to be plenty. “The excitement this year,” Ann relates, is the okra, which seems to have gotten up higher this year and has escaped the animal visitors that ate last year’s crop.

This morning Ann has been working with Jordyn Maynard, an intern with Next Step Ministries, a Christian organization headquartered in Wisconsin that sponsors mission trips for youths from Christian congregations throughout the country. This is the third year that Next Step has brought young people to Knoxville to work with charities here. Jordyn is from South Dakota, and attends Sioux Falls University, and Jim Wright interjects that “she is the best intern we’ve ever had.”



South Pantry Coordinator Ted Mohundro serving a meal to a “traveler”

Jordyn learned about Next Step Ministries from a professor at SFU when she was looking for an internship for her major in media studies and music ministry. She thought “it would be a really cool opportunity to go somewhere new and get the experience as a worship leader.”

As an intern, Jordyn’s jobs include worship leader, social media coordinator, and team leader. As worship leader, Jordyn selects songs for each night’s worship—she also sings and plays guitar--and as team leader, she contacts each of the groups who are coming prior to their week of arrival and talks with them about the sites to which they will be coming, answers questions and follow up, and makes sure they feel prepared coming into the week.

Today is Friday, which is Jordyn’s day off. Still, she is here volunteering. Why, we ask?

“I love the atmosphere, especially in South Knoxville.

This is my fourth or fifth time being here for the whole summer, and I love the atmosphere and the connections they make with all the guests. It is so beautiful, and I really love how Ted provides hot meals for people coming in. It’s so beautiful to see them taken care of that way. And I’ve never personally experienced an atmosphere like this before. I’ve never experienced the homeless or low-income families, so being in a place like this—I think God put me in this place for a reason like to learn a lot.”

The youths whom Jordyn has worked with this summer have also lifted up their positive experience with their volunteering at the South pantry.

“I always like to ask my groups—‘what did you think of today?’ [They respond], ‘**It’s like oh my God. It was so amazing! It’s so cool to see like how many people need food and like the fact that we are able to help them in that way.**’ A lot of the students are surprised about how much we give out. ‘Oh my God, we started with five boxes of lettuce, and it’s all gone.’ They really love the experience. I’ve seen a lot of them have meaningful conversations with the people” to whom they were distributing food.

As our conversation with volunteers continues, Ted shows us some very nice donations generously offered by a couple who every month donate surplus items from their business to be shared with pantry guests. These items include water bottles, shoes, and tee shirts. Like many other donors who contribute goods or financial support to the pantry, they learned how people care for others at the pantry and wanted to participate in making life better for those who are in need. It is another illustration of the hospitable welcome, care, and dignity offered to guests who visit South Pantry.

“It takes everybody,” volunteer Shawn Holden concludes.

Summing up the sentiments of many, she says, “The reason this place is so special is because they are giving back to the community. They are making it stronger.”



Uncle Jesse enjoying a meal at the South Pantry

Poetry in Motion: A Glimpse of the Northwest Hospitality Pantry



Pantry Guests arrive early mornings at the Northwest Pantry.

The wheels start turning early at the FISH Northwest Hospitality Pantry/Warehouse on Scott Avenue. At seven a.m., when pantry/warehouse volunteers begin to arrive, guests have already begun to line up for service. During the next couple of hours more volunteers and guests will arrive, and the line will swell.

By opening time at 10 a.m., the pantry is already operating like a well-oiled machine; but its human component—the volunteers with their love for our guests and the beauty and artistry of their coordinated efforts of service—is more like poetry in motion.

When the 10,000 square foot facility opened in 2007, the work of FISH Hospitality Pantries took off in a much larger way than had been possible before. The Northwest Pantry/Warehouse has since become the hub of the organization. Distributing food on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and the fourth Saturday, **the pantry welcomes around 3,500 guests each month. About 30 pantry and warehouse volunteers work to facilitate the sharing of thousands of pounds of food that are coming in and going out each week.**

The bustle continues for several hours, and even after the official closing time of 1 p.m., every guest is served as long as volunteers are still present in the building.



Betty Thompson and Jordyn Maynard bagging tomatoes on the Northwest Pantry Pavilion

Here is a glimpse into the Northwest Pantry's operation around noon on a recent Thursday, after the pace has slowed somewhat.

At the outdoor pavilion, which houses much of the fresh produce, long-term volunteer **Betty Thompson is sorting and bagging tomatoes.** Soon, Betty is joined by Jordyn Maynard, the Next Step Ministries intern who has been coordinating a team of volunteers working with each of the neighborhood pantries this summer.

In the front room, **guests are being greeted by Barbara Jackson**, who with her husband, Fred, who is working outside today, is a member of Rogers Memorial Baptist Church. **As the guests enter and sign in, Nadelle Gier, who grew up in Alaska, but who has volunteered here for the past seven years,** will present them with a bag to fill with the groceries they select. Next, they will proceed to the desk where **Jazmin Luna, originally from Ecuador, is positioned to present the Kids' BOOST Bags** of fruit, dairy, grains, and vegetable items to all



Next Step Ministries Volunteers from North Carolina on the service line at Northwest Pantry

the children who are accompanying their family members today. **Lidia Torres is also on hand to help distribute the children's bags. Lidia, who began volunteering soon after immigrating from Cuba, has spent the early morning hours upstairs assembling the children's BOOST bags, which are chock full of nutritious, tasty, kid-friendly items that thrill our youngest guests.**

Inside the warehouse, Bill Keener, a committed long-term Northwest pantry volunteer, is chatting with one of the Next Step leaders, LaMeecha Locklear, and David Walker, an outside coordinator. **Bill, 88 years old, first came to volunteer with his friend Wanda Payne only a day after the opening in November 2007 of the Northwest Pantry.** Bill worked with the sweets and Wanda was at the front desk until her illness and subsequent death. Afterwards, Bill continued distributing the sweets until the last couple of years. He is still a friendly

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Volunteers Lidia Torres and Jazmin Luna prepare to present BOOST bags to youngsters visiting the Northwest Pantry.

presence on Tuesdays and Thursdays, mainly keeping the volunteers' refrigerator filled with drinks and snacks, and but still serving on the line on occasion.

LaMeecha moves into the service room to join some of the other Next Step Ministries team members who are offering nonperishable canned and packaged foods including items like tuna, corn, green beans, rice, and pasta to the guests coming through. These volunteers are all from the North Carolina coastal town of Pembroke, where they attend Calvary Way Baptist Church. **All are members of the Lumbee, the largest state-recognized Native American tribe east of the Mississippi River. LaMeecha's daughter, Trinity Brayboy, is serving alongside her, next to two teens, siblings Briden and Anna. At the front of the line Gail Kenney, who in her 18th year of volunteering, is distributing a variety of meats. Working with them is Chip Pennoyer, who has been volunteering only a short time, and says being part of this community is fantastic.**

LaMeecha says that along with her Christian faith she is still in touch with the culture of her heritage and the Native American spirituality of those who came before her and their shared belief that there was a "great Spirit who cared for everyone" and blessed them with creation and the beauty of nature. "I really enjoy serving, because God has blessed me richly."

Trinity agrees. "God has just blessed me, and I wanted to come and have this opportunity to serve. It's been great. It's been wonderful."

What are the chances that people from Ecuador, Cuba, Alaska, Alabama, South Dakota, and the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina would be chatting at the end of just one day with East Tennesseans at the Northwest Pantry?

After moving through the service room, guests circle back to the other side of the front room where six-year volunteer, **Natasha Caldwell, is offering frozen meats and soups, before they exit the side door to the pavilion and outside stations of additional perishable fruits and vegetables, breads, and sweets.**

At the end of the day, conversations between volunteers continue as warehouse workers move carts around to bring in stock from the pavilion and service areas to store for next time. But even if guests arrive at the last minute after the official closing time they will be welcomed with the same spirit as those who were there first thing.

Volunteers affirm that it has been another very good day at the pantry, and they marvel at all those with whom they have crossed paths. What are the chances that people from Ecuador, Cuba, Alaska, Alabama, South Dakota, and the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina would be chatting at the end of just one day with East Tennesseans at the Northwest Pantry?

It's like that most days at the Northwest pantry with volunteers from Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Palestine, Guatemala, Columbia, Ukraine, Romania and many other countries as well as East Tennessee and other regions of the United States.

FISH volunteers have found a place where they can collaborate with diverse people from all over the world, united in a shared mission. Together, they work to create a world as it

should be, where everyone has the right to the food they need to grow and develop.

It is a place of faith, hope, and love. A place of Poetry in Motion



Bill Keener and Eddie Eddie Russell at Northwest Pantry

The FISH Northwest Pantry: Bridging the Gaps that Exist Between People



Bill Keener, LaMeecha Locklear, and David Walker chat during a break in the Northwest Pantry/Warehouse.

When David Walker retired from the printing company and began volunteering at the FISH Northwest Pantry seven years ago, he swore that he never wanted to supervise anyone ever again. But as the food supply at the Northwest Pantry/Warehouse continued to grow, the service area began to spill outside the building. We needed to utilize every bit of available space inside and outside to serve the growing number of guests, and we needed volunteer coordinators to decide on food placement and to assign volunteers to cover the outdoor stations.

“Once we open,” says David, who now oversees the work in the Pantry’s front parking lot, “actually, the place works pretty well without any coordination. Basically, all I have to do is assign people to the stations where they are going to be and check in on them. Actually, my job is pretty easy.

“This really isn’t like supervising somebody. It’s really like—we’re all here to work together. Nobody really wants to be in charge.

“I say to our volunteers often, ‘There is no really wrong way to do this, and everybody has different ways of doing it.’” **On occasion, he says, “Volunteers who have just come a couple of times come up with better ways to do things than we’ve thought of, those of us who have volunteered for years; they’ll often show us a better way to do something. It’s really nice.”**

As the workday at the FISH Northwest Pantry winds down one afternoon, Walker reflects on the work of the pantry and its spirit.

There are myriad volunteers these days, and as David considers what makes a good volunteer, he says he firmly believes, “If you come here to work, then you believe that people who are food insecure should have access to good nutritious food.

“I have been very lucky to get to know some of the volunteers here, because we have some amazingly compassionate people that volunteer and **being**

here has made me a better person.”

David also appreciates the diversity of the volunteers. **“I think it’s great that we have such a diversity in the people who work together, and I take it as a model for how all organizations ought to work. Just over the past week I have seen conservative Christians working together with openly gay volunteers. I have seen people with various nationalities who don’t speak each other’s language, volunteers [who] work together and be respectful and kind to each other. I’ve seen people who have strong political views both to the left and to the right get along together and work together.”**

He refers to an article he read that “said that the gaps that divide us are not usually bridged by getting together and talking about our differences. They’re usually bridged by people of different opinions working together toward a common goal, because the people get to know each other as individuals and not just as [those with] political or social views. I think that is true of the pantry. For me, it’s often a better experience.”

Walker also points out that it is not only religious people who work at the pantry. He relates his experience of working “really well with people who are not religious. I know several of our volunteers who are either atheist or agnostic. One of them told me recently the reason he liked working at FISH, [is] because ‘everybody can be themselves and nobody’s trying to convert you to their opinions.’”

David, a member of Church Street United Methodist Church, applauds for the diversity of religions of the volunteers, pointing out that we are fortunate to have volunteers from Muslim, Baha’i, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian traditions.

“I really think that diversity, for me, is the most important value--that we have so many different people working together. It’s what the whole society should emulate.”



Volunteers gather for Northwest Pantry morning meeting.

At FISH Hospitality Pantries We Offer Bread and Community



Community School Program -- You Teach Me / I Teach You, our Language Exchange Program



Next Step Ministries youths volunteered this summer at all of our neighborhood pantries.



Leaders of Alliance for Community Transformation (ACT), an organization developed by FISH Hospitality Pantries to work on the causes and long-term solutions to poverty strategize at a planning meeting.



Photo of East Pantry Wednesday Volunteer Crew Lunch with Pastor William Riddle, St. John Missionary Baptist Church (2nd from Left)



Barbara Jackson leads a morning meeting at Northwest Pantry.



Guests and volunteers enjoy a painting class together at Northwest Pantry.



Charles Neal and JaGade DeBurns, Warehouse Team Members



Volunteers gather each morning before pantry opening to converse about our values for hospitality toward our guests.

Articles written by Beth Carroll Hunley and edited by Leslie Sholly



FISH Hospitality Pantries
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fishpantry.org



Children picnicking with nutritious, kid-friendly snacks on the side of the Northwest front food display area

The Values That Guide Us at FISH Hospitality Pantries

As we celebrate the 39th anniversary of FISH Hospitality Pantries in September, we take time to reflect on the values that have guided us in our development over the years.

The determining factors of the success of Hospitality Pantries ultimately have been our values for non-judgmental welcome, inclusiveness, and diversity, and the underpinning faith vision of all religions that every person was created by God with dignity, and that we are all part of a common humanity dignity, and that we are all part of a common humanity.

Strength in Diversity

The diversity of our pantry volunteers and supporters who come from every racial and ethnic background, religious tradition, and many geographic areas has been significant in our progress over the years. The value of their insights cannot be overstated.



Guests selecting food items on the Northwest Pantry Pavillion