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Wesley Food Pantry: Fighters of Food Insecurity

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Wesley Food Pantry: Fighters of Food Insecurity

Right here in Urbana-Champaign, there are people from all walks of life all working for the same mission: alleviating food insecurity. The Wesley Food Pantry is a team that strives to help end hunger in our community by offering families food that will provide them for an average of a week. This food pantry is unique and special for several reasons. They follow what is known as a “Choice Model.” This means that people who go into the pantry are allowed to choose what items they want to bring home to their families. They offer evening hours for those who are unable to attend in the day, and in fact, they are the first in the community to accomplish this. Not only do they provide food, they also provide information. While people are waiting to enter the pantry, they can find out more information about social services, health, and employment in an effort to present the solid causes of food insecurity. Lastly, the pantry also goes beyond providing people with food to combat hunger. They also promote literacy in younger people by giving books to children and even having crafts available for them to complete while a parent or guardian shops.

My personal experience with the Wesley Food Pantry was rather limited until now. When I was in middle school, a friend invited me to volunteer for the food pantry. I remember being hesitant because I was afraid that I would mess the system up since I had never volunteered before. When I arrived at a large warehouse in Champaign with my friend and her mom, we were approached by several other volunteers. I remember everyone being so kind and supportive that all of my fears went away. I later learned that these traits help make the pantry so effective and positive. For the next three hours of our night, I worked with several other volunteers scooping rice into bags and sealing them. The work was tiring, but it was worth the effort when I reflect on it now. I was able to meet new people that desired to help others and alleviate food

insecurity. Even though as a middle schooler I did not fully comprehend the impacts of my volunteering, I know now that volunteering is a great way to help out programs or organizations like the Wesley Food Pantry make a positive impact on the community and the world. I always wanted to volunteer again, but my school schedule never seemed to allow it; that is, until the beginning of May this year.

I completed several hours of volunteer work for the Wesley Food Pantry and learned many things from my experience. Before my shift, I was eager to see what they would need me to help out with. I had not volunteered for them since my middle school experience and I was unsure of what to expect. The pantry took place in my old middle school, which has switched locations. It brought back many memories, and while I was sad it was not my old middle school (Campus Middle School for Girls), I was pleased to see that the space had been transformed into the food pantry. Immediately, I was greeted with the same enthusiasm and kindness that I had been seven years ago. I first met with Dawn Longfellow, the Operations Manager. She put me to work right away weighing boxes of donated food. I was struck and moved by how many donations they received, and how many people were helping the cause. After I completed weighing the boxes, an experienced volunteer informed me that I would be helping people shop. I got the same nervous feeling I got when I was in middle school because I was worried that I would mess up. But, he really supported me and told me that I was going to do great. This cheered me up and I was ready to learn.

As he took me around the room, he told me the rules. First, he discussed the number of bags a person will get depending on how many people are in their household. The number of bags increased if you had more people at home to take care of. As we help them fill up their bag or bags with goods, we need to be conscious that no items go over the top of the bag. I asked

why this was, and they told me that it was to ensure that everyone who showed up to the pantry all had the opportunity to get food or materials. Another rule that supported this was the limits on certain items. While some food items, like the bags of rice I had helped pack when I was younger, was unlimited as long as it did not exceed the top, other foods had limits. For example, with the tuna, those shopping were only allowed to take one can of tuna or one bag-packaged tuna. Similarly, milk products had a limit of six. The expert volunteer told me that the limits were put on these foods either due to a lack of the items in their stock or the demand they typically have. They want to make sure that essential items, like milk, are available for everyone. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the pantry also supplies toilet paper, napkins, and lotion. Before my experience, I always thought that the pantry only provided food. As I exited the food storage room, I noticed that there was a separate room filled with books. I asked why that was there and he told me that the pantry tries to promote literacy in children and gives out books. As a future teacher, this warmed my heart knowing that kids would be able to enjoy reading and the power of stories.

By the time the pantry opened, I was ready to go. Throughout the evening, I helped push carts for people as they shopped or helped them pack their bags strategically so they could get everything they needed. As a shy person, I was a little nervous to talk to strangers, but I ended up loving the experience. I enjoyed talking to people about their hobbies and life. After I would help them shop I would help them pack the food into their car, the bus, or in some cases, a suitcase. Every trip up and down the stairs, I would pass the booth where shoppers could learn more about employment, food insecurity, education, or social services. Everyone, the shoppers and volunteers, were all incredibly kind. The attitudes in the building were all positive and

productive. Volunteering at the pantry gave me a better sense of what is happening in my community.

I learned a great deal from this project and met really wonderful people. The mission of the Pantry is to alleviate food insecurity and, from what I saw, they are making every best effort to do so. I realized that there is so much I can do for my community by volunteering and being kind to people regardless of their background. In turn, I formed an even greater sense of gratitude than I ever had before. I definitely wish to volunteer over the summer to learn even more about all of the things the Wesley Food Pantry does to fight hunger. I encourage my community to volunteer and take action as well, even if you are shy. While the volunteers were passionate and devoted to the cause, the community as a whole need to take action in fighting food insecurity not only here in Champaign-Urbana, but throughout the entire world.