Lindsey Piland

Feature story

COMS404- Specialized Journalism

“Food Packed with Love”

The small brunette girl with freckles is a student at a Montgomery County elementary school. She has two younger brothers attending preschool. Her mother stays home to take care of the little boys and her father goes to work every day. There is no food on her kitchen shelves or in the refrigerator and the mother wonders what she will feed her children that night.

However, one day her father returned home to say that he lost his job due to the slow-down in the economy. Since jobs are scarce, he has trouble finding employment and his unemployment check will soon be running out.

The family struggled to put food on the table. Luckily, a program in Blacksburg called Micah’s Backpacks provides the children in the family with food for the weekend. There are many things that can impact a family and cause loss of income and that is why this program is needed. Reasons include an unexpected illness or an unexpected bill such as a car repair that results in a loss of transportation.

“Micah’s Backpack has given us an opportunity to find out if a family may need additional services or support,” said Amy Ruppert, a Price’s Fork preschool teacher.

Friday afternoon children at two preschools and seven Blacksburg schools receive a gift of healthy food for six meals and snacks. Micah’s Backpack is a non-profit organization that addresses children’s hunger issues by partnering with local schools. The program does this by providing direct assistance to students and families who qualify for the free lunch program. Each week during the school year, the students who qualify receive a bag filled with enough food for the weekend. The bags contain two breakfasts, two lunches and two dinners.

Every Thursday evening volunteers from across the Blacksburg community from various academic, civic and religious groups work together to pack the backpacks. Although there is an active list of around 350 volunteers, about 60-70 people gather once a week to pack bags. The partner schools distribute the backpacks to the students. Micah’s Backpack began working with families at Price’s Fork Elementary School in November 2008.

Currently, Micah’s Backpack partners with many schools in the Blacksburg area. The schools involved include all five elementary schools, the middle school and high school. Micah’s Backpack also works with the Head Start Preschool and VICCC. In all, the group provides backpacks to 230 children and youth per week. Micah’s Backpacks partners with many organizations including Feeding America Southwest Virginia, the food bank in Salem along with Kroger, Sam’s Club and Food Lion. The group also gets a lot of food from food collections that their volunteers design and carry out.

The organization started when the pastor of St. Michael’s Lutheran Church, Pastor John Wertz, read an article in a magazine about a backpack program in the late summer of 2008. A few members of the church gathered to hear about the idea and decided they could do a program like that. Within a month the group delivered their first five bags to their first school, Price’s Fork Elementary. Since then, they have grown steadily. “When we first started out we had five backpacks and there was just a handful of volunteers, but we’ve grown to where we are now so it’s been an amazing couple of years just watching the growth of Micah’s Backpack,” said volunteer Diana Crawlman. Weekly packing takes place at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church, located at 2308 Merrimac Road in Blacksburg between 6:15-7:15 p.m. On Friday the bags are delivered to the nine participating schools between 9 a.m. and noon.

The food in the bags is a single serving, is shelf-stable and easy to prepare. “That way the kids can help themselves if they need to,” said Jennie Hodge. Hodge has been involved with Micah’s Backpacks since it started in 2008 and has been the director for almost two years.

All participants are identified by the schools as in need of assistance. “The schools know their kids best,” Hodge said. Most, if not all of the kids in the backpack program also qualify for the free and/or reduced breakfast and lunch program at their school. Also, if one child in a family qualifies for the backpack program, then all the other children in the family will too. “The beauty of the program is that you don’t know who the kids are by looking at them. They are happy children,” said preschool teacher Amy Ruppert.

“Volunteers are our greatest asset,” Hodge said. The Micah’s Backpack program actively and enthusiastically provides a great experience for volunteers. “We take sprinters and marathoners and everyone in between. We feed kids and while we do it we’ll build a fun community and volunteers enjoy that,” she said. “I enjoy working with all our diverse volunteers from the young to the young at heart in making a positive impact on kids in Blacksburg.”

Many of the volunteers who gather Thursday night are seniors from Virginia Tech who are a part of a service learning project in a Community Nutrition class. “Food and security is more of an issue than people realize it is, so it is really rewarding to be able to know that you’re helping kids be able to eat food on the weekends,” said Virginia Tech senior Jennifer Abell. “Even though we don’t get to actually see the food be delivered to the kids, it’s really cool to know where it’s going and just working with all the community members who come together to get the bags put together is really awesome.”

“ I absolutely find this work rewarding because you know you’re sending kids home with meals for the weekend that they probably wouldn’t have otherwise, so it a great feeling,” said VT senior Eva Delaney. “Food and security is important to me because I come from an area where it’s a big problem and I grew up with kids who didn’t have a lot of food so I think this is a really great cause to ensure we’re sending children home with food,” said another VT volunteer Jenny Puckett.

To raise money to help pay for the items that go in the bags, the program has written successful local, regional and national grants. They also engage partnering groups in food drives and that helps to drive down the costs of the weekend food. The cost to keep the program going monthly changes as the cost of bags fluctuates depending on market prices, food drives and grant food for example.

“We get food from the food drives and people donate money,” said Crawlman. “We get discounts from Kroger and Sam’s and then we are also partnering with Feeding America in Salem and we can get food for as little as 19 cents a pound. So we can get a lot of food. They actually have children’s feeding programs which allows us to get free federal money and free food through their program. So we say that each backpack has food inside that cost an average of $9-$10. So we do have to have a lot of sources for the food.”

The program now packs food in plastic bags for the kids to take home. When they first began the program they used to use actual backpacks when they were smaller in size. About two years in, one of the participating schools asked the program to switch to plastic grocery bags. When they switched for one school, all the other schools followed suit.

“Using bags is great for a few reasons,” Hodge said. “Kids can put the plastic bags into their existing school bag or backpack so there is less to carry, we don’t have to rely on backpacks coming back to the schools or losing backpacks which would add to our administrative costs and it is a really great way to recycle grocery bags!” said Hodge.

Low income families should contact their school principal to find out if they qualify for the program. Program participation will be kept as confidential as possible. A parent or guardian must return a signed permission form for their child to participate and this form is available from their school principal.

Another program St. Michael’s Lutheran Church is starting is called Soups for Seniors. It is another feeding ministry where volunteers gather on the last Tuesday of every month to pack meals for seniors in income-based housing in the Warm Hearth Village.

“We just recently started the program called Soups for Seniors, where we’re actually packing bags for our senior citizens once a month. And that is even more rewarding because you get to see the seniors and you get to talk to them and hand them the food,” said Crawlman.

On the first trip to Warm Hearth, volunteers brought 60 bags and the residents collected them and had enough to eat for the entire last week of the month. This program is in a partnership with AARP, Thrivent and groups at Virginia Tech. “Feeding seniors is another way to care for a vulnerable population in our community,” said Hodge.

“There is a very good feeling that comes with knowing that kids in my community are being fed when they may be hungry, Thursday night is the highlight of my week,” Hodge said. “I do find this rewarding because we spend a couple of hours once a week volunteering and after you’re done you feel like you’ve accomplished a lot,” Crawlman said. “You touch the lives of a lot of kids, you don’t see them but you know that someone’s out there that has food for the weekend that wouldn’t normally have any.”