



With newly found free time, recently retired school administrator and West Rockhill resident Donna Huff followed a call to create a nonprofit to combat food insecurity among Pennridge students.

BY SARAH LARSON | PHOTOS BY JUAN VIDAL

Donna Huff was shocked when she learned that 1 in 4 children in the Pennridge School District were food insecure. A retired elementary school teacher and principal in the Souderton Area School District for years, Huff knew some families were struggling. She also knew her home district of Pennridge had its share of needy students.

But Huff, who lives in West Rockhill Township, didn't realize just how many local families were having a hard time putting food on the table until she learned about The Bean Bag Food Program. Serving the Souderton Area School District, the program provides bags of food for weekends and holidays to children who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch at school. Inspired by that example, Huff decided to look up the percentage of children in Pennridge who were similarly affected. She was astounded when she learned that it was 26.8 percent.

"I think no one can believe it when they hear 1 in 4," Huff said one recent afternoon. "They sit there and think, 'Am I living in La La Land, because I can't

believe there are that many needy people?'"

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, nearly 445,000 Pennsylvania children - almost 17 percent - didn't always know where their next meal was coming from in 2021. Compounding the challenge, children who experience food insecurity can develop educational, behavioral, and health problems. And while these children receive meals at school, they may not have regular meals when school is not in session.

Huff, who was newly retired, decided she would do something about that. In 2019, she launched a nonprofit, RamPacks, to provide bags of shelf-stable food to Pennridge students who qualify for free meals at school, ensuring that they do not go hungry over a weekend or a holiday.

Huff received early support for the project from her church, St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Sellersville, which cleared out space to serve as the program's first food pantry. As the word spread, Blooming Glen Mennonite Church and Souderton Brethren in Christ Church stepped up to house the second and

“When I retired, I thought there would be lots of things I could do. Never in my wildest dreams did this come into my head.”

– Donna Huff, RamPacks

third pantries for RamPacks. The churches and others throughout the Pennridge area actively support the program, donating funds to buy food and rallying volunteers, Huff said.

Randy Swope is one of them. A member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Perkasio and a retired Pennridge teacher, Swope began volunteering with RamPacks early on. Even after more than 30 years of living in Perkasio, Swope said his experience with RamPacks showed him a different perspective.

“When I taught school, I knew that we had kids that were living in cars, but I didn’t realize how many kids are food compromised. The numbers are staggering,” said Swope, who now serves as vice president of RamPacks’ board of directors. “I never knew about it, but once you see the need, you think, ‘Oh my goodness, where have I been?’”

RamPacks has grown exponentially since its founding. It started out serving children at Sellersville Elementary only, and within a couple of years, it grew to serve all seven of the district’s elementary schools. Then it expanded into the three middle schools and recently finalized plans to serve freshmen at Pennridge High School.

All told, RamPacks buys, stores, packs, and delivers food every week dur-

ing the school year for 230 Pennridge students. And they do it all operating solely on donations. Each food bag costs about \$8, Huff said, estimating that it costs about \$304 to feed one child for a year.

RamPacks runs on volunteers, and both Huff and Swope stressed the need for more helping hands. Tasks include everything from picking up food donations from area grocery stores, packing the students’ bags of food at the pantries, delivering the bins of bags to the schools, and more.

Starting a nonprofit wasn’t exactly what Huff, now 70, had envisioned for her retirement, but as RamPacks continues to grow, she couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

“When I retired, I thought there would be lots of things I could do. Never in my wildest dreams did this come into my head,” said Huff, laughing. “I thought maybe I’ll do something with special needs adults, or maybe I’ll get on a board somewhere, or write a children’s book. I had lots of ideas of what I might do. And all of a sudden, this comes to me. The way everything has rolled out since then, it’s got to be a God thing.” □

A longtime journalist and current public relations professional, Sarah Larson lives in East Rockhill, Bucks County.



RamPacks volunteers, from left: Connie Moyer, Faye Lawrence, Norma Strothers, and Joan Frick with Donna Huff (second from right).