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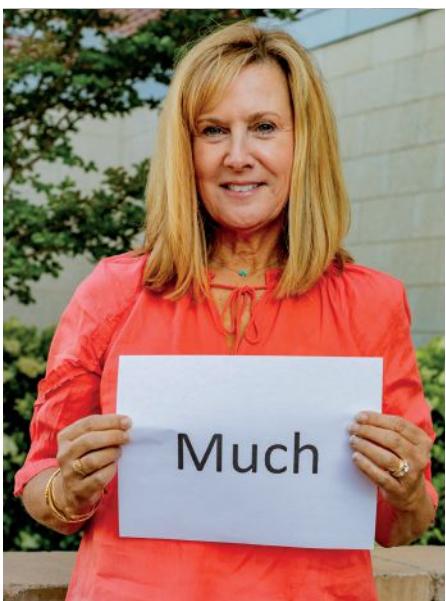
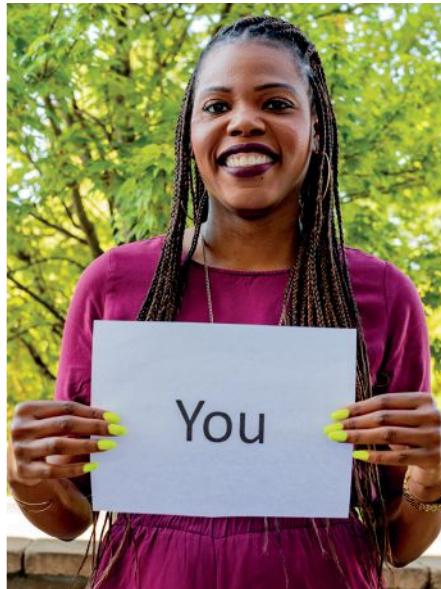
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welcome to
BALLANTYNE'S
BACKYARD



Look for the Helpers

Volunteers and school counselors assist families in need

By Jodi Werner Greenwald

There's a story Fred Rogers often told from his childhood about seeing scary news on TV. When he did, his mother would say to him, "Look for the helpers."

In Ballantyne, one does not have to look far to find them.

When Ballantyne families' needs increased at the start of the pandemic, neighbors and school counselors stepped in to help, big time.

The infrastructure already existed at Community House Middle School. A few times a year, their parent volunteers and school counselors collected food and gifts for families in need. One parent at Community House, Heather McAfee, thought teaming up with the other Ardrey Kell High feeder schools would create a bigger impact.

She was right.

When schools shut down in March 2020, McAfee worried about the students who relied on schools for breakfast and lunch. She approached Valerie Johnson, a school counselor at Community

House who had led holiday drives in the past, and they discussed doing something to help.

McAfee circulated an email, and in less than 24 hours, volunteers had mobilized a collection. They assembled 350 bags of food at Community House and distributed them to 100 families the next day.

"The community came together," McAfee says. "That's when it all sort of snowballed. After that event, it went so well, we felt the need to do more."

For the next round, because Community House was closed, 12 families opened their porches for collection, and South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church offered space for assembly. Ardrey Kell's student government also donated food it had collected for Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina (the

organization wasn't accepting donations at the time), and the school's sports concessions donated more than 1,000 drinks.

The helpers kept coming: 26 volunteers sorted and assembled 650 bags of food. Fifteen CMS



Photo courtesy of Heather McAfee

Nineteen cycles later, they have donated more than \$175,000 in grocery gift cards and more than 1,400 bags of food.



Photo courtesy of Kerry Price Doub

Before the pandemic, Helen Adams Realty agents donated holiday gifts to Community House Middle School's Sharing Bin project. Last winter, they gave gift cards instead.

staff came and distributed them to 100 families they had identified as being in need. Promising Pages gave out collected books.

"Heather was bold enough to ask, and people responded," says Johnson. "Which, I don't want to say was completely shocking, but it was definitely surprising. I just didn't know that our community would show up to help other community members as they have."

Given the volume of donations and concerns about handling and quarantining food, the group shifted to gift card donations. They held biweekly drives until the end of the 2020 school year, when they distributed a lump-sum sponsorship to help families over summer break.

Community Partners

Generous individual giving, coupled with corporate sponsorships from Suncap Community Relief Fund, Walmart and Pamlico Capital, helped the group collect and distribute a whopping \$30,000 to address food insecurities that summer. Families drove through Elon Park parking lot to receive their sponsorships.

Another corporate partner, Helen Adams Realty, has worked with Community House Middle School for almost a decade. Kerry Price Doub leads the Ballantyne office, and her children went through the school.



Photo courtesy of Kerry Price Doub

"It's just been a tremendous outpouring of giving from our community," McAfee says. "I feel tremendous pride to be part of a place that's been so willing to give. Especially since Ballantyne is an area [where] most people think we don't have need, but it's



Photo by Shrimp & Grisettes Photography

Leaders of Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need include CMS school counselors and the organization's board members: Janelle Clemons, Liz Emmett, Lisa Smith, Erika Clarke, Amber Brown, Valerie Johnson and Heather McAfee. Not pictured: Tori Collins.

Eight years ago, she and her colleagues started participating in Community House's Sharing Bin project.

Around Thanksgiving, they shopped for holiday gifts and brought them to Community House to distribute them to families before the winter holidays. Last December, with the pandemic, the Helen Adams agents donated gift cards instead.

"We're extending that family feel, if you will. The company is very big on giving back to local families," Doub says.

As the volume of giving kept rising, McAfee and other dedicated volunteers started a board of directors, opened a bank account and filled out paperwork to create a 501(c)(3) organization, which was actualized in November 2020. They also started a monthly giving cycle.

Nineteen cycles later, they have donated more than \$175,000 in grocery gift cards and more than 1,400 bags of food.

a community that has need. We just need to keep our eyes open and help our neighbors."

Student groups also have contributed in significant ways. Ardrey Kell's student government secured donations for an entire food cycle, and the school's Royal Theatre Patrons donated concessions from the spring play. The Community House Middle School National Junior Honor Society held a food drive, as did Polo Ridge Elementary School. The Young Black Leadership Alliance contributed \$5,500 in gift cards.

"I can't tell you how people have given, given and given," McAfee says.

Preserving Dignity

To assess families' needs, Johnson circulates quarterly surveys to the counselors at Ardrey Kelly feeder schools. "We counselors are the filters, if you will," she says.

They try to discern which parents are out of work, have preexisting conditions or are struggling single parents. Teachers may notice a child



Heather McAfee, Valerie Johnson

"Heather was bold enough to ask, and people responded."

— Valerie Johnson,
school counselor,
Community House Middle School

who wears the same clothes and doesn't have materials. The counselors develop relationships with those families.

"We're finding that the effects of COVID are so far-reaching," Johnson says. Providing food "has helped those families maybe pay some other bills because they didn't have to worry about food for at least a couple of weeks out of the month. I know it has helped families tremendously."

Johnson stresses that the struggles families have faced because of the pandemic are struggles that could happen to anyone.

"If we all were very honest with ourselves, how many weeks or months could we go without working without our situation changing dramatically? And that's what is happening."

Families interface with just one person, their school counselor, and get the help they need. Johnson collects basic information from the counselors for 10-15 families per school and shares it with McAfee. Names are never mentioned, just the number of people per household and the students' grades and schools.

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