



Part of the Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need Team
Top L-R: Sally Pickard, Lauren Rosenbaum, Susan Medina,
Heather McAfee, Erin Furey, Mini Kartha; Bottom L-R:
Valerie Johnson, Lisa Smith, Mary Bleich, Amber Brown

BALLANTYNE FAMILIES HELPING NEIGHBORS IN NEED

Giving the Gift of Full Tables and Full Hearts

BY KILEY GARVER | PROFESSIONAL PHOTOS BY TIM SOUZA PHOTOGRAPHY

*We would like to thank
Connolly Orthodontics
for bringing you this
month's cover story.*

"How can we help families this Thanksgiving?" When **Heather McAfee** called up Community House Middle School in 2017 with this simple question, she had no idea the path it would take her on. "It started as something really informal," she says. Community House counselor **Valerie Johnson** and her team identified some families within the school that could use some extra support, and Heather and her small community of family and friends put together 25 bags of food items to give. It was a start, but Heather wanted to do better. "It showed us that there was a need to fill." The following year, she decided to cast a wider net and reached out to counselors at all of the Ardrey Kell feeder schools. With their help, they were able to identify and serve 100 families. "We assembled the bags at the Morrison YMCA. It was still very informal," Heather says. But **Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need** was born.

Then the pandemic hit. “I remember that Friday when everything shut down. I called Valerie again, knowing that we had several families that relied on school breakfasts and lunches.” She spoke to **Jamie Brooks** [formerly Community House principal, now principal at Ardrey Kell], who agreed to open the cafeteria for us. That Sunday, Heather sat down at her dining room table to write an email asking the community for help. When she finished, she asked her husband to proofread it for her. “Heather...” he said. “You’re trying to help all the Ardrey Kell feeder schools? I thought you were focusing on Community House! How do you know you’ll get enough food?” She didn’t. But she hit send anyway. The following morning at 9:30, the entire cafeteria was brimming with volunteers and food donations.

Mini Kartha was one such volunteer who received and responded to the email asking for help. “We were fortunate; I was staying at home and my husband was able to keep his job and work remotely. It was a blessing to still have teachers that were willing to teach, companies still willing to keep their employees and provide food on the table. But I knew that was not the same for many families out there in the Ballantyne area,” she says. She and the other volunteers spend the morning putting together 350 bags of food. By 11:30, families were coming in to collect them.

Heather and her crew recognized the importance of the work they were doing and set out to do it again two weeks later.



Ballantyne Families volunteers pose with some of the food bags they've put together.

Twelve families across Ballantyne opened their porches to receive food donations. This time, Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need was able to put together and give out an astounding 650 bags of food.

“I think it really opened all of our eyes to the need we have in our community,” says Heather. “A lot of times, we don’t realize that some of our neighbors are struggling. These people may put up a good front and do their best to keep up, but they’re here and

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they're often overlooked." Mini echoes the same sentiments. "You never know what kind of hardships people are going through. You can't let where you live define that. Hardships are hardships no matter what your area code is," she says.

Our community was also not immune to the debilitating effects of the pandemic. Many families that began 2020 in a secure place found themselves struggling to make ends meet by the end of the year. "Your situation can change in a heartbeat," Heather says. "Someone might get ill, have an accident, lose a job. Several things can happen that are out of your control."

One local single mom found herself in these shoes in 2020. "I have a small personal business, and when Covid shut down the world, I immediately lost two thirds of my business. During that time, I was also having surgery for an injury and dealing with the emotional impact of a terminally ill family member." It was during that time that her kids' school counselor called and asked if she could use some donated grocery gift cards. Initially, she was hesitant to accept. "Sometimes it's hard to receive help, especially if you're used to doing everything yourself and being the one to give. I had to surrender a little bit." The gift cards took some of the stress off her plate and allowed her to focus on other important things. "It was such blessing. I'm so grateful for those who gave so generously," she says.

Heather doesn't know the names of most of the people Ballantyne Families helps; **the identities are kept confidential**. However, she had a chance encounter with this local mom. "I was speaking at church about Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need, and a woman approached me afterward and told me that she had been a recipient of some of the donations. We both shared an embrace and I told her we'd continue to be there for her, but she said 'Actually, I'm in a much better place now; I've actually been able to contribute to Ballantyne Families!'" Her business had taken a positive turn, and for the first time in ten years, she no longer qualified for reduced lunch. "Covid



brought many challenges, but I also discovered priceless blessings during that time, one of them being the people with Ballantyne Families. With my business growth, I am thankful to be able to pay it forward and share my blessing with the organization," she says.

In this post-pandemic world, Ballantyne Families has continued to pivot to meet the changing needs of our community. **They give food bags out four times a year, focusing on when students are out of school and away from the meals they count on there:** Thanksgiving,

Christmas, Spring Break, and Summer. Each food bag is accompanied by an encouraging note written by different groups—5th graders at **Elon Park**, employees of **Brighthouse Financial**, the **Community House Junior National Honors Society**, to name a few. And to bridge the gap in between food drives, Ballantyne Families has opened a permanent food pantry at Community House. "**Principal Brian Slattery** gave us the use of one of their trailers, and we have a system set up for families to request needed items. Volunteers can sign up to donate the items and shop the pantry once a week when food is requested by a social worker or school counselor," says Heather.

To date, Ballantyne Families has **supported around 1,800 families and given over \$220,000 in grocery gift card donations**. Most of that has been in the form of individual donations between \$50 and \$250; it truly is "Ballantyne Families Helping Neighbors in Need." They have also grown to include 30 volunteers who take leadership roles and a donor volunteer list of over 800 people who support their efforts. It has been amazing to see how this community has responded," says Heather. "I think most people want to help, they just might not know where to begin. This gives them an avenue."

The work that Ballantyne Families is doing has not only had a profound impact on the community it serves, but on the volunteers as well. Valerie Johnson, now a board member, reflects on her experience with the organization. "It has been such an encouragement to see how our community wants to help.



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The Ballantyne Families food pantry at Community House Middle school



Ardrey Kell students volunteer in the food pantry.



Ardrey Kell students volunteer in the food pantry.

During the pandemic when everything was so difficult and politically-charged, it was a breath of fresh air to see people coming together to work toward this common goal." Mini Kartha has been encouraged by her work with the organization as well. "It has been a humbling experience, to say the least. It has become a passion for me to help within our community in any small way. 'Seva' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'selfless service,' and is perhaps considered the most important part of any spiritual practice. It lies at the heart of the path of karma yoga—selfless action—and asks us to serve others with no expectation of outcome. I also hope to see my boys doing more of that for years to come."

For Mini's boys, and for the rest of us, there will continue to be many opportunities to serve our neighbors. As the economy weakens and people continue to tighten their belts, needs increase and giving decreases. Ballantyne Families knows that they can't solve all the problems, but they are determined to step up when and where they can. "What I love most about this organization is it doesn't just provide food; it provides the mental bandwidth for families to focus on other needs. It doesn't solve the whole problem; that's beyond the scope of what we can do, but it lightens the load. That's not a small thing, and I've seen that over and over firsthand," says Valerie.

To find out how you or your company can become involved and help your neighbors, visit <http://www.linktr.ee/ballantynefamilies>

If your family attends or works in one of any of the Ardrey Kell feeder schools and is in need of food, please contact your school counselor. They will connect you to the food pantry.



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