



—Robin Nelson

Kathy Pickett, dean at Mulberry Middle School in Mulberry, Fla., offers a student a backpack filled with a weekend supply of food through the SmilePak program.

SmilePak program provides students nourishment, hope

By HEATHER VILLA

Thirty students at Mulberry Middle School in Mulberry, Fla., know they won't go hungry. On Friday afternoons the group meets Kathy Pickett in the school's food pantry to secretly pick up backpacks filled with food. The food in the backpacks provides the students and their families a weekend supply of nourishment. On Monday morning, empty backpacks are returned to the school, and the cycle is repeated.

The backpacks are part of a program called SmilePak, sponsored by Agape Food Bank, a Catholic Charities of Central Florida program in Lakeland. Once a week, more than

1,000 food-filled backpacks are given to kindergarten through high school students who attend one of the 22 participating schools.

The SmilePak program was launched in January 2012, following an anonymous \$50,000 donation from a Polk County, Fla., parishioner.

The need is evident. More than 49 million Americans struggled to put food on the table in 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Part of the struggle is concentrated in Central Florida, where more than 600,000 people reside. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 17.5 percent of Polk County's population lives below the poverty level.

For schoolchildren from Polk Coun-



ON THE WEB
SmilePak
www.cficc.org/smilepak/home

ty who live in suburban poverty, the SmilePak program is a physical, developmental and emotional blessing, addressing an often invisible crisis.

Kim Long, director of Agape Food Bank, said the participating schools were initially selected by looking at "the highest percentage of needs, based on the statistics."

The schools targeted offer subsidized lunches to as many as 90 percent of the student body. The SmilePak program allows students to continue to be fed over the course of a weekend.

"Before you feed their minds, you need to feed their bodies," Long said.

"The SmilePak program is a small part of the formula for a wholesome and healthy academic student," said Pickett, dean of Mulberry Middle School. "We are so appreciative of the program."

Pickett shared how the program works at Mulberry. The teachers often first identify students in need. However, sometimes it's the students who know about a friend who could benefit from the program. And sometimes parents contact the school directly.

"The schools are on the front lines, knowing the needs of the students," Long said.

Agape Food Bank delivers the food to the participating schools and creates the schedule recommending what to include in each backpack. Consultations with nutritionists ensure the food offered is nutritionally balanced. Thanks to smart purchases, the money spent to fill one backpack totals just

\$6. According to Long, the food items are purchased specifically for the SmilePak program and the best possible products are selected.

Each week, high school student volunteers load backpacks with six pounds of food to provide students and families a weekend of easy-to-prepare snacks and balanced meals. Pasta, tuna, canned stew, canned vegetables, packaged fruit, beans, rice, shelf-stable milk, granola bars and cereal are examples of the types of items found inside a backpack.

The backpacks given to the students are intentionally nondescript; allowing the students to confidentially participate. The price of each dark-colored backpack is less than \$4.

The high school student volunteers who are responsible for filling the backpacks with food bear another responsibility — confidentiality.

Jose Rivera, who oversees student volunteers as faculty adviser for the Mulberry High School Key Club, said, "Many Key Club members are aware of which fellow students are in financial need, by observing which students carry the backpack, yet they know to uphold the oath of confidentiality and responsibility they were entrusted with. It brings a whole new meaning to community service awareness."

As many as 15 students at Mulberry High School receive backpacks filled with food.

Wahneta Elementary School in Winter Haven is another participating school. Susan Hall, a media specialist at the school, has watched the number of students who participate in the program dramatically increase.

"The first year I packed the backpacks myself, with only the help of my daughter and a couple of her high school friends who needed school service hours from time to time. We sent out about 50 each week that year. The second year, I had a volunteer who came and helped me weekly and together we packed about 100 a week," she said.

Now nearly 150 students from the Wahneta Elementary School take backpacks home each weekend.

"Our children are extremely grateful for the food each week and will readily tell you, 'The only good meals I get are the ones at school,'" Hall said.

The SmilePak program is a communitywide effort. The employees at the Agape Food Bank, school employees, volunteers, and numerous financial contributors make the program successful.

The USDA reported in 2012 that the National School Lunch Program provided meals to more than 31 million children in the United States, and also said the healthy and productive futures of children who don't receive proper nutrition may be at risk. Fortunately, programs similar to SmilePak are found throughout the United States.

"Many of us take for granted the blessings God provides," Hall said. "This program is such a blessing for those children who do not have what so many of us take for granted every day."

The children who participate in the SmilePak program don't reflect the total number of student who could benefit from the program. "We're only limited by our budget, not our need," Long said.

[Heather Villa is a freelance writer. Her work has appeared in *The Writer*, *Appleseeds* and *Chickpea*.]

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