At the end of August I celebrated my 5th anniversary with WAFER. I can still recall feelings of the huge responsibility and of being completely overwhelmed. What I discovered is that I am still completely overwhelmed, just in a different way. The overwhelming enormity of the job comes and goes, but more often my feelings shift to overwhelming feelings of love. Love takes so many different shapes and forms, day to day it looks so different and yet so beautiful.

I am overwhelmed by the love our volunteers give – to the people we serve, to other volunteers, and to the staff. I have witnessed this with our Thursday morning volunteers. Amy brings her pre-teen daughter, MacKenzie, who lights up the pantry with her infectious giggle and warm smile for everyone. Another volunteer, David, and MacKenzie have developed this sweet relationship we all witness. Every week, he brings in various items to teach her how to juggle during down time.

Our generous communities overwhelm WAFER with love. This may be money to purchase food when donation supplies run low, the 6 jars of peanut butter given by the same person monthly, or 40 half gallons of milk supplied every other week by a local family because we never have enough. Love is found in gifts of pet food given by Jennifer in memory of her husband Byron Clements and dog Greta, so that our clients’ furry family members are also cared for. Love is an offer and follow through to repair our carts, fix a leaky toilet, or organize an event and encourage others to become involved (see “A Volunteers Perspective” on page 3), tremendous support for the mobile pantry (see “Mobile Food Pantry Update” on page 2), and so much more.

Compassion, given with love, is yet another overwhelming area I witness. Compassion announces itself in many ways —when people can truly see the hurt of someone else in need, the tears of volunteers who feel so helpless as they hear the struggles of the people they serve, a song sung by one client to the little girl ahead in line, or the hug from one stranger to another who each come from such different places yet find commonality in humanity.

I often hear donation comparison statements such as, ‘I can only give $20, it isn’t $200 like someone else may give.’ You see, my friends, when we all offer what we can, whether it be food, money, or a service, our combined effort makes a greater impact. That is when we all get to experience being overwhelmed with love and that feeling is something truly special. Would you consider continuing to financially support WAFER’s anti-hunger work right here at home?

Thank you for joining me on this journey for the last 5 years. You have overwhelmed me with your love for our community and YOU are the reason why our neighbors in need have food to put on the table at mealtime. You provide others an opportunity to work their way out of a tough situation, a better life, increased security, and health. YOU help make our community better for all!

On behalf of WAFER’s board of directors, staff, and volunteers,

Merry Christmas and a blessing filled New Year!

~Erin Waldhart, Executive Director
WAFER Mobile Food Pantry Update

On August 17th, WAFER staff and board members announced the Mobile Pantry matching funds campaign. This campaign was unique since two local donors, The Franke Foundation and Bill and Cindy Berg, offered to each match all donations to $20,000 which essentially tripled any donation. The campaign goal was $100,000 to fund startup costs and first year operations. Thanks to a generous community of donors from family funds, foundations, businesses, and individuals, the goal was met by November 1st!

The Mobile Food Pantry was retrofitted in time to take its’ maiden voyage at the end of September to the rural communities of Bangor and Mindoro. It was so well received that a patron who utilized the Mobile Food Pantry called the following morning within one hour of opening. The patron explained how beneficial it was, that the food will help stretch food for the month, the options were great, and a plan for using the service again in the months to come.

Additional sites were added in October and November; south La Crosse in an identified food insecure neighborhood, low-income and senior high-rise housing, and St Clare Health Mission. Each site targets a specific population and thus far this program is right on track. The stop at St Clare provided an opportunity for Mayo Clinic Health System staff to tour the Mobile Pantry as well.

“The Mobile Food Pantry is already a success”

Mayo Clinic Health System staff offered positive feedback and asked many questions for personal and professional use. A conversation with one healthcare provider stood out. WAFER staff was asked about program growth, community impact, and success; how it will be determined, defined, and evaluated. WAFER staff responded, “It already is a success.” Based on Mobile Food Pantry clients feedback success has been achieved. Some comments WAFER staff have received are:

“My truck broke down years ago and I haven’t been able to get to WAFER since.”

“I will be able to make it through the month now.”

“I wasn’t sure how I would afford a turkey for Thanksgiving.”

“I like being able to choose my own food.”

The goal of the Mobile Pantry is to reach people unable to get to WAFER (due to physical or transportation barriers) and provide healthy food options to ensure no one goes hungry. This goal is successfully achieved with each stop. Through November, nearly 20 stops were made and ~200 food packages provided including canned goods, fresh produce, baked goods, and frozen meat. Over the next few months, the Mobile Food Pantry will be stopping at new locations throughout La Crosse County to impact even more individuals and families, realizing even more success. Thank you for being a part of the initial success and choosing to be a part of the success yet to come!
A Volunteer Perspective

Yining (Tracy) Zhou has volunteered at WAFER since February 2017. What started as a short commitment of 20 hours for school turned into long term involvement and a sincere passion for serving others. Through October she gave ~100 hours of service in addition to her commitment as a student at Onalaska High School.

Tracy shared an essay assignment with our staff, reflecting on her volunteer opportunity and personal impact. She shared her feelings and opinions prior to volunteering at WAFER and then how those opinions or beliefs changed after working firsthand with our clients. "I was not even aware that such poverty existed in my own backyard." She described the people she worked with, their circumstances, and that despite their differences and the differences of those she typically encounters in her life, the concept of poverty became more tangible. Furthermore, she stated, "my increased awareness was what drove me to volunteer at WAFER in the first place. Once there, I didn’t just see the grim reality of poverty and the need to help; I saw the humanity of those living in poverty."

About a month ago, Tracy approached WAFER staff about coordinating a drive to meet a need she saw at the pantry. Donations of baby items, particularly diapers, are rare even though 1 in 3 served by WAFER are under 18. It is emotionally difficult to receive a request for these items and not have any to offer. Tracy experienced this first hand too. Instead of just recognizing the problem and letting it go she has chosen to do something about it – she is coordinating a diaper drive within her community of peers and businesses. "The people who came to WAFER needed some help to make ends meet, but their need for help was not what defined them. The people were deserving of help, and I was honored to be one of the people offering help."

The gift of time is a crucial component of providing good service. Each month more than 1000 hours are generously given by individuals, organizations and businesses. A few groups who gave their time recently are Associated Bank, Gensler, Target, LHI, WTC Health Information Management, UW-La Crosse and Viterbo University student service groups, and Aquinas Interact. Many individuals who were a part of a group have come back on their own.

The gift of talent is special because each talent is so unique. Take the gift of knitting. One woman who relies on WAFER’s service each month has her talent to give – making bed sized afghans. Her husband goes around town collecting leftover yarn scraps. She takes a bit of this and that to make something truly beautiful, useful and warm for fellow pantry goers.

The gift of personal and hygiene items fly off the shelves. They are rarely donated and highly requested. These items allow our clients to present themselves in a socially acceptable way and have a greater chance for success when applying or interviewing for a job. That’s where The Women’s Fund of Greater La Crosse comes in by providing grant funds to purchase some hygiene items and for the last two years conducting a “supply drive”. Additionally, twice this year “The League of the Ridiculous” of the Beer By Bike Brigade collected and assembled feminine hygiene supply kits.

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Mike Voss, Vice-President
Lee Bluske, Treasurer
Judy Siefert, Secretary
Brad Clarkin
Sally Friend
Dennis Herricks
Jerry Saterbak
Dorothy Stroschein

Spotlight on Giving

The gift and the giver, each unique, but comes straight from the heart. WAFER Food Pantry relies on both the gift and the giver to continue moving forward in service and to provide for the unending food needs for families and individuals right here at home. Here are just a few gifts and givers in the last several months:

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Our Mission:
Responding to God’s love, WAFER provides food and works to eliminate hunger.

How You Can Help Now

VOLUNTEER | DONATE FOOD | DONATE ONLINE

Call, click or visit WAFER to volunteer and donate food. Donate online at www.waferlacrosse.org and use the PayPal link on the right side of each page.

If you would like to write a check and donate, please use the envelope enclosed inside this newsletter.

Thank you!