

An Interview with Jane Parker

- Becky Twaalfhoven

Jane Parker is the manager of the Marblehead Food Pantry, located at 80 Atlantic Avenue.

When was the food pantry founded?

1991

Who founded the food pantry, and are they still involved?

A small group of people, I think from this church and a couple other churches, became aware that we really could use a food pantry and they worked through the organization Making Ends Meet, which is a local organization that works with rent and housing issues. So we were sort of part of them for a while and then we became our own organization. And we have one person that I know of who was in the first group who still is a volunteer. But there is no one founder - it was sort of a group of people who thought that maybe people who need help with housing and rent need food also.

When and why did you get involved with the food pantry? What did you do before working there?

I lost my job of 16 years in 1993, and I was looking for a job. In 1994 I started volunteering here, and in 1995 they were looking for someone to take over as coordinator, and I thought, "I'll do it until I get a job." And here I am, 21 years later, not having a job (although I have had lots of little part time jobs). I didn't know much about it, but I thought it would be interesting to do some volunteer work. My job before was a small business in Salem - Harbor Sweets Candy - and I did financial and administrative stuff.

How many families a week does the pantry serve?

In town, there are about 185 households that use the pantry either regularly or occasionally. Some people come every single week, some people just come every so often, but in any given week we have between 50-60 people come in. It's good, because if we had a lot more than that it would be hard to keep everything stocked. But it's worked out. But when I say 50-60, I like people to know that we have more families and single people than that who use the pantry, just not every week.

How many pounds of food would you estimate are served?

Last year we weighed a few bags on a bathroom scale and came up with an average weight of about 15 pounds, then counted up the bags as best we could and multiplied that. So I worked back through that process, including how many people come each week and whether they get one bag or two, and I figured out about 62,000 lbs each year (a little over 4,000 bags per year). Per week it's about 80 bags (a person can take two bags for households of 3 or more).

What is the biggest challenge about the pantry?

One of the challenges is making sure that there is enough food on the shelves for every group of people coming in. We have a warehouse base in the Masonic Lodge and are in the process of moving an old storage room here, so we have some storage where we can keep some stuff, but that's one of the challenges. Another is scheduling. We have two volunteers working here every time on a rotating schedule, and fortunately I don't do that - my colleague does that, which enables me to do a lot of other things. But it's a really challenging job, and some volunteers have special requests and little things come up. But it definitely pays off in the end.

What is the biggest joy about the pantry?

I think the biggest joy is when you hear back from somebody about how much we've made a difference, or how grateful they are, or how much this helps. There's often a lot of that - sometimes people come and go and you don't get any feedback, but sometimes people tell us it really helps.

What is one thing you'll remember forever about your time working at the pantry?

As long as I'm physically and mentally able, I will stay with this. I'm fortunately able to do this and haven't needed to get the job I needed 21 years ago. There are challenges, and it can be frustrating, but there's lots of variety - I do some of the shopping, putting away food when it comes in, writing thank you letters, talking to the Rotary club when it comes in, and Girl Scouts, etc., so it's very rewarding.

What is one thing you'd like everyone to know about you?

I'm grateful that the lemon of losing a job turned into the lemonade of me being able to be involved here, which has been as rewarding as a paid job would have been. Also just to remind people that I also have lots of volunteers (I don't actually work in the pantry when it's open), so it's a whole group of people and I'm not on my own.

How many hours a week do you give to the pantry?

I don't actually participate - mostly - in the shifts. November, December, and the first half of January are the busiest months, because we have things like the Thanksgiving drive and another Christmas drive and that's when we get most of our donations. So those 10 weeks or so can be 20-30 hours a week. We had a re-registration of all of our clients this spring with a database, and so that was a lot of work. But generally, outside of the holiday seasons, it can be anywhere from 10-20 hours a week.

What else would you like people to know about the food pantry?

Mainly that it exists! There are still people who are surprised that there is a food pantry in town, even after it has been here for 25 years. People don't picture this town needing or having a food pantry, so I think that it's good for people to realize that there is a lot of economic diversity in the town. We actually have several areas that the town owns for subsidized housing, and about half of our clients live in those areas.

Do you ever feel like you need more help? Do you ever want to get the word out more?

We haven't needed to, because usually people come to us, but we might. I don't want to have it come out that we really need volunteers. I would probably go to SPUR to ask for help, and try to hook up with volunteers like that; but we seem to have a lot of people who want to do it, so we've been lucky that people and donations have come to us. We rely totally on donations - we don't get any government funding, which is probably good because we might not get a lot - but almost all of the churches, synagogues, schools, and scouts, as well as individuals and businesses, have drives. We've never had to fundraise, except for a few years ago when the Reporter put in an article about us and stuff started coming in again. I don't think the pantry will ever go away, because the need will always be there. It did grow in 2008 with the big crash, but regardless of how the economy in general is doing there will always be people who need a little extra help.