

Program expands role of food pantry

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It's one thing to pick up a box of rice at the food pantry. It's another to stop in for rice, stay for a cooking lesson and go home with a rice cooker. A new North Shore program offers struggling families that opportunity.

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The program, called Nurture, takes the idea of a food pantry to another level, said founder Kathryn Guylay, of Winnetka. "Every class, we give the participating families a piece of cooking equipment," she said.

The program is co-sponsored by the Northfield Township Food Pantry, and classes take place at St. Phillip Lutheran Church at 1609 Pfingsten Road in Glenview. Roughly eight to 10 families may participate at one time. The program is divided into five classes, each one with more complex cooking methods taught. For example, during the first class, families can learn to use rice cookers. The next class, it's lentils, and so on.

Guylay said she came up with the idea for a pantry/cooking class program by thinking back to her graduate school days, when she honed her expertise in rice and beans. If a grad student can be well-nourished by relying on affordable dried foods, Guylay said, maybe that same method would work for needy families.

Guylay said this type of program is becoming increasingly relevant. "With this economy, it's so important for people to know that you can have a healthy diet, even on a budget," she said.

The organization itself understands financial constraints. In fact, it started with just \$1,200 raised between a group of friends and families. "With just that, we were able to start our program," Guylay said. "We're on a total shoe-string budget." Nurture is funded and stocked completely by outside contributions. Still, the group has mustered much community support. Nurture has an unpaid staff complete with a dietitian, nurse and other nutrition specialists.

With a little more help, Guylay said she hopes to expand the program to other food pantries (such as the one at the New Trier Township office), so that more families may participate.

The group accepts donations in the form of money, food and cooking equipment (from oven mitts to slow cookers). In addition, it accepts physical fitness equipment, such as jump ropes, shoes and basketballs.

Guylay said the organization seeks volunteers, as well, to help teach courses or to act as liaisons to other charitable organizations.

Guylay invites interested people to get involved by visiting www.nurtureyourfamily.org.

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