



the hunger coalition: fighting hunger, feeding hope

BY KIM FRANK KIRK

With the approaching holidays, don't you feel extra generous? Maybe you play Santa to a child whose wish is on Iconoclast's giving tree, or maybe you give cash to the jingle-belling Salvation Army volunteer. Perhaps you collect and donate canned goods for a local food drive. It is, after all, the "Season of Giving." But, what happens after the magical month of December? Who steps up during the long winter that follows? For the staff and volunteers at The Hunger Coalition, the season of generosity steadily continues long after the holiday spirit has come and gone.



TOP TO BOTTOM: The Hunger Coalition aims to make their clients' experience a positive and supportive one; Some harvest from the Hope Garden in Hailey; The Hunger Coalition depends on food donations from the community to help fight hunger insecurity in our valley.

“ Our big focus has always been doing more for less. The participation of the community contributing on so many levels—that’s what makes it such a phenomenal organization in so many ways. ”

—Tyler Davis-Jeffers,
President of The Hunger Coalition Board

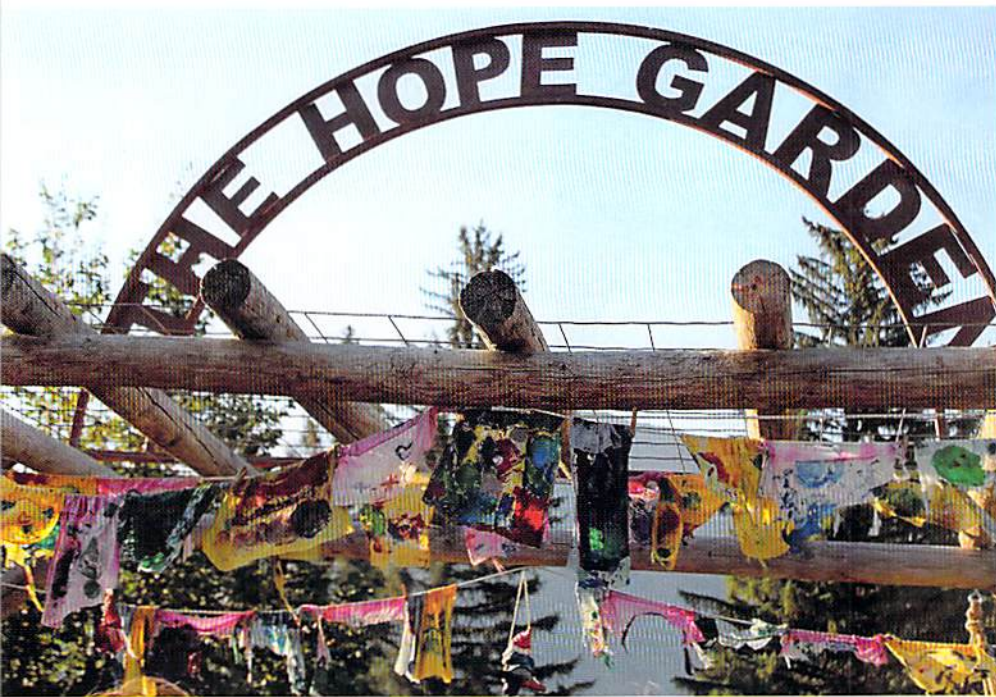
February 2009: On the first day The Hunger Coalition began direct food distribution, their narrow street-front clogged with parked and circling cars. The swelling crowd included fathers who had lost—or feared losing—their jobs, anxious mothers, and their children. In three short hours 175 people filled the streets and sidewalks, forcing the closure of neighboring businesses and creating a food line that conjured images from the Great Depression. In one week, The Hunger Coalition exhausted their entire months’ supply of food. Responding to what was clearly a crisis, the staff and board committed to figuring out how to feed any person in need and created a system that works to break the poverty cycle.

Food security. It’s at the core of what The Hunger Coalition does. Founded by Tom Iselin in 2003, The Hunger Coalition was a response to a lack of centralized food assistance in the valley. Food was collected through food drives in large yellow barrels placed in markets, churches, and schools. Local markets sold Stop Hunger cards that raised funds to buy more food and pay a staff member. The strategy was to give food to local agencies that would distribute it to their clients in need. In 2008, the nation began its slide into recession and social service organizations began to buckle under the food needs of their clients, unable to focus on

their missions. Rising to the demand with an unstoppable force of volunteers—from the community and local businesses—generous donors, and a visionary staff and board, The Hunger Coalition has only strengthened its response to the ever-growing need in our valley with abundance, innovation, and style.

Is it hard to imagine going hungry? I remember my first four months in Ketchum, a twenty-something with a master’s degree, a sizeable student loan, and only part-time work. I’d scrape change from the bottom of my backpacks and carefully count it out, making careful decisions in the grocery store,





ABOVE: The Hunger Coalition's Hope Garden in Hailey is a community project that helps the organization meet its mission; RIGHT: The YMCA's Kids' Club helps make pies for the holidays.

ashamed I was paying in coins—a dead giveaway of my personal poverty. My idea of a food bank was a depressing warehouse with generic labels and brown sacks of half-rotting food. I imagined the people who went there as much worse off than I was, standing in a long line where they were treated as a number and handed an allocated bag food.

Not this food bank. When Naomi Spence, Program Director of The Hunger Coalition, led me into the facility's warehouse (located in a smart, new space in Bellevue), I was stunned. Shelves of fresh, wholesome food including soy and almond milk for those with allergies, baby formula, dog food, name-brand pastas, rice, and condiments. Culturally diverse choices. In the walk-in cooler (cleverly designed and built by local volunteers) sat a variety of organic and fresh produce from Wood River Organics, Atkinsons, Albertsons, and The Sage School, along with apples and pears gleaned from neighbors' fruit trees.

On the top shelves waited stacks and stacks of slow cookers available to people who enroll in one of The Hunger Coalition's workshops. The star of the warehouse, the mobile food bank that makes food-supply drop-offs in convenient

locations up and down the valley, enables the organization to directly reach people in need. The space is so inviting I wanted to start shopping. "We believe in maintaining dignity," says Naomi. "We have moms who come in and use shopping bags from stores to disguise that they are getting their food here. I hear them say, 'Oh, you have my daughter's favorite brand of cereal!' It's important to be able to maintain some sense of normalcy in the face of all their loss."

With 150 regular monthly volunteers and a range of supportive businesses that donate, produce, glean, and distribute food, there is a pervasive spirit of generosity, signaling a community that gets it. "The Hunger Coalition is not simply food for people," Naomi says, "but a lifecycle. A cultivated food community effort." Even local schools play a part by identifying children who will benefit. The Hunger Coalition's Backpack Program provides meals to get a child through the weekend, a period most kids look forward to as a respite from the normal school routine. But for kids whose lives are affected by food insecurity, the weekend is that long stretch of time punctuating every week when the school breakfast and lunch programs are not in effect. That said,



LET THERE BE PIES!

The YMCA of the Wood River Valley teams up with The Sage School and The Hunger Coalition

For the Second Annual "10 Y Pies Project," the YMCA Kids' Club partnered with The Sage School and The Hunger Coalition to make and distribute pies to local families. In early November the Y's Kids' Club held a food drive, made pies (and put them into boxes donated by Wiseguy's Pizza) and passed the pies on to The Sage School and The Hunger Coalition to distribute to local families for Thanksgiving. The community collaboration involved in this project embodies the sort of efforts that go into making The Hunger Coalition as effective as it is.



the situation

- + There are 545 local children under the age of 18 who are food-insecure.
- + 10% of our valley's total population requested food from The Hunger Coalition in 2011.
- + A family of four in Blaine County must bring in \$79,289 for a living wage, nearly 4 times higher than the federal poverty line. (Courtesy of The Hunger Coalition).
- + In 2011 The Hunger Coalition distributed 185,000 pounds of food to an average of 210 individuals per week, 45% were children under the age of 18.
- + The Hunger Coalition 2013 budget: \$456,303.
- + Revenue Sources: 70% from individual donations, 25% from grants, 4% from businesses and churches, 1% from other sources.

how you can help

- + Join The Hunger Coalition's Open Hands Club for automatic, monthly giving.
- + Visit The Hunger Coalition's Ways to Give Page.
- + Buy a Stop Hunger card at your local grocery store.
- + Donate food (see website for list of needed foods).
- + Volunteer: there are many opportunities all year long to volunteer. Check website for specific needs.

www.thehungercoalition.org

respect and dignity are paramount to The Hunger Coalition's mission: children's own backpacks are filled discreetly to avoid any stigma.

The organization's work goes beyond food distribution to include a mentoring program that helps people turn their crisis situation around. In the past year, The Hunger Coalition has witnessed a profound shift in the people that they serve—individuals and families with higher levels of education and/or skill sets who have suffered a series of setbacks—medical, job loss, house foreclosure—and find themselves needing services. “This change in clientele has been both heartbreaking and motivating,” says Naomi. “We're seeing our peers. In response to this rise in need, we've developed a mentoring component that helps people get back on their feet. We, with our partners, now

offer workshops that help connect people to a full-range of support so they can market themselves again with résumé building, technology skills, job searching, etc. We are helping people reinvent themselves.”

Over the years, local non-profits have shouldered much of the burden of providing basic-need services, education, and support to help people in the valley. Groups have stepped up to pool resources and work together in earnest. “We are always trying to do more with less,” says Tyler Davis-Jeffers, Hunger Coalition Board President. “Our vision is to reduce the structural causes of hardship and poverty. And our partnerships with many organizations from Nurture to The Sage School, the Advocates, and Idaho's Bounty offer us variety of approaches.” It's evident from the wide-reaching work The Hunger Coalition does in our valley that this strategy is not only necessary, but also extremely effective.

The Hunger Coalition has redefined the traditional food bank. “Because we're able to follow up with the people we serve and develop trust, they are more open to our mentoring support every time they come. We build real relationships,” says Naomi. “No one is undeserving of food.”



ABOVE: The Hope Garden enables The Hunger Coalition to grow some of the food they distribute.

how you can get help

Need food back on your table? Call The Hunger Coalition at **208.788.0121** to make an appointment with a case manager. Food will be distributed throughout the valley three times a week.

THE HUNGER COALITION

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www.thehungercoalition.org