

Vernonia Cares Lends a Helping Hand

By Scott Laird

From humble beginnings, a pillar of the community has developed. Vernonia Cares is the local food pantry with a long history of service. Currently, they distribute supplies, including food boxes containing three days worth of meals. Known as just "Cares" to those familiar with them, the organization started out putting together Christmas gift baskets back in 1984. It was quickly decided that there was actually a year round need for a food pantry and services. Part time space was generously offered by the American Legion. With only small changes, that's how things have operated for over 20 years. But change is on the horizon.

"We are really looking forward to our new building," said current Director Sandy Welch, about plans for construction near the old Mill Pond that will place the Senior Center and Vernonia Cares under the same roof. "Sharing a building with the Senior Center will be a win-win situation for everybody. Since many of our clients and services are the same, this will really help both the Seniors and my clients," said Sandy during a recent visit. "We will have a loading dock, storage and space which will make providing services much easier."

Vernonia Cares currently purchases about 4,500 pounds of food each month, serving about 100 families, or 250-300 people of which approximately thirty-three percent are children and twelve or thirteen percent are seniors).

Sandy Welch took the position as Director at Vernonia Cares in 2001. "It was a steep learning curve from day one," said Sandy. "When I took over, I went door-to-door to every business in town, asking for help. Everyone stepped up in some way, whether it was with funds, information or discounts." Sandy had been a homemaker and was homeschooling her children. "My last child was getting ready to enter high school, and I decided it was time to widen my field of contact and get out in the community more. Vernonia Cares was looking for a director, and I was asked if I might be interested. I volunteered for a month and thought and prayed about it before deciding to take the position."

"One part of the job I was not especially comfortable with was the networking, being so public, having my picture taken frequently. It was probably the thing I least enjoyed, and yet it has also been such a blessing. I have really enjoyed the chance to get to know and work with so many different people in the community," said Sandy.

If Sandy Welch is the face of Vernonia Cares, then the volunteers are the heart and soul. "We have a great, devoted group," said Sandy. "We could not do what we do without them." She also commented on the level of community involvement. "We are



strongly supported by this community," said Sandy. "We have local citizens who bring us extra produce from their gardens and even have people who raise their garden with the intention of donating what they overproduce to us. We especially appreciate fresh produce. It's something we don't usually have access to."

About one-third of the Vernonia Care's budget comes from United Way funding with the other two-thirds being raised through contributions, grants and/or fundraisers. One fundraising opportunity is coming up August 18 – the annual Vernonia Bear Creek 10K/5K Run/Walk Event. To register, contact Maria Lemay, Race Director at (503) 429-1069.

Cares is especially thankful for contributions from groups. Recently, the United States Postal Service's Food Drive and the Rose City Motorcycle Club delivered over 1,000 pounds of food to Vernonia Cares. "Cycle Oregon donated their leftovers from the weekend ride when they were in town last month," said Sandy. "Those kinds of donations can help us for months."

When asked about special or favorite stories, Sandy responded that she always likes when some-

one's situation improves and they no longer need services. "I especially like to see the people whose situation changes to the point where they are able to donate to Cares themselves. I love watching that. To be able to give back is a wonderful feeling."

Vernonia Cares continues to be a beacon of hope for those in the community who need a helping hand. While children and the elderly make up fifty-six percent of those assisted, Sandy said, "All kinds of people come in and use our service to help them get by during a month – it might be that someone just moved or has been laid off."

If you would like more information about Vernonia Cares, or would like to make a donation or volunteer, contact Director Sandy Welch at 503-429-1414, or e-mail her at directorsandy@yahoo.com.

Vernonia Cares is currently located at: 627 Adams Avenue, Vernonia, Oregon

For donation purposes, food value is estimated at \$1.50 per pound. Vernonia Cares is a 501c3 and can provide tax deductible receipts for donations.

Groceries and supplies that are rarely received in donation, and that are especially helpful include:

- Personal care items (body soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant, shampoo)
- Canned chicken or beef, or meals already containing meat
- Paper products (toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, Kleenex, paper plates & cups)
- Cleaning products
- Diapers (any size)
- Baby food or formula
- Coffee, tea, or juice

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