

FFA powers 40,000 mac and cheese meal donations

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Four months of fundraising and a morning's worth of elbow grease from students of local FFA chapters added 40,000 meals to local food banks Saturday.

"It really pumps you up to know you made an impact," said Hannah Walker, a junior at Hermiston High School. She was one of the blue-shirted leaders at the school directing teams of students measuring out and packaging meals of fortified macaroni and cheese, paid for by \$10,000 the students raised themselves from local businesses and organizations.

Walker and classmate Reed Middleton brought the idea to Hermiston from a national FFA leadership conference in Washington, D.C.

"Going to that kind of thing lights a fire under you," Middleton said. "You say, 'This world needs help. What can I do?' And now here we are with \$10,000 and 40,000 meals."

The service project was part of a national program called Meals of Hope, which helps organizations around the country host food-packaging events like the one on Saturday. Middleton and Walker said they helped package food for Meals of Hope in D.C. as part of the conference, and decided then that they wanted to do a similar event back home.

They emailed back and forth with Meals of Hope and convinced their own FFA chapter and six more in the area (Pendleton, Echo, Heppner, Ione, Weston-McEwen and Milton-Freewater) to join in their fundraising efforts. They ended up with enough cash for 40,000 meals, and the Hermiston FFA kicked in some extra money for T-shirts with names of sponsors who donated.

The project culminat-



Kord Dickenson, 6, of Heppner scoops out excess macaroni for packets of fortified macaroni and cheese Saturday during the Meals of Hope food drive in Hermiston.

STAFF PHOTOS BY E.J. HARRIS

ed in Saturday's two-hour event, where about 85 students from Umatilla and Morrow counties gathered at Hermiston High School with bulk boxes of macaroni noodles, cheese powder and soybean protein to be packaged into individual meals roughly the size of a store-bought box of macaroni and cheese, and then placed into packs of 36 meals for easy transport.

The mood was energetic and upbeat. Students sang along to music pumping through the room, made up chants to announce each box's completion and competed with their neighbors to fill the most boxes.

Austin Mota, a sophomore at Pendleton High School, said things had been "pretty chill" packing boxes and he was glad he came.

"I really just like helping



Hermiston junior Deven Hofbauer places labels on boxes of macaroni and cheese..Saturday.

out in the community," he said. "I don't mind volunteering."

Mildred Moreno, a

freshman from Hermiston High School, said she was glad the teams of students

were mixed between multi-

ple chapters so that everyone got to talk with students from others schools.

"The teamwork was

fun," she said. "I got to know some people I didn't know from Echo."

According to Department of Human Services data from 2015, 21 percent of Umatilla County residents are receiving food stamps from the government through SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Another report shows 1,250 families in Morrow County were receiving SNAP benefits in 2014.

Hermiston FFA chapter advisor Leah Smith said fighting hunger is a cause that FFA students can understand, given the number of students in area schools who often go hungry.

"People know," she said. "... Kids don't necessarily want to point out that maybe their friend doesn't have a lot. Who knows? Maybe some of this food will go to some of these kids. But they're all here working together."

The food was bound for CAPECO in Pendleton, which will distribute some directly to needy families and send the rest to other local food banks like the Agape House in Hermiston.

CAPECO distributes about 1.2 million pounds of food a year, while the Agape House's emergency food box program assists about 900 people each month in getting through the last few days of the month and sends home a backpack full of food each weekend to about 150 students in the area. Stanfield's food bank serves 120 to 150 people a month.

After the last meal was packaged, the volunteer force turned their attention to wiping down tables, sweeping up noodles and breaking down boxes. Walker and Reed said they were thrilled to see the project finally come to pass after months of working on it.

"I'm excited," Reed said.

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