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Food backpacks: Weekend nutrition

By MARGARET REIST / Lincoln Journal Star
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The backpacks have stories to tell.

They are stories of poverty, the kind that send children to school without breakfast, often with no dinner the night before, stories hidden behind Lincoln's neat, tree-lined streets and comfortable houses and well-stocked refrigerators.

Each story is different, defined by children who strap the canvas bags over their small shoulders each Friday and lug home nine pounds of food so the weekends won't stretch out long and empty.

They are stories like Vakayla Robinson's, a West Lincoln kindergartner whose grandmother picks her up each day from school, in a place she's just recently landed, far from her home in Mississippi.

Ask Bessie Robinson, her 36-year-old grandmother and mother of two preschoolers, to tell you her story and she talks of those who have helped, who opened their arms to her when she found herself alone and scared.

She came to Lincoln a year ago, and, before long, was on the phone to Friendship Home, looking for sanctuary from a violent relationship.

Normally, she said, when things go bad, when you have nowhere else to go, you go home. But home, in Jackson, Miss., was gone, washed away by Hurricane Katrina.

And so Robinson stayed, and with the help of those at the Friendship Home, found an apartment and a job and the beginning of a new life.

Then Vakayla came to live with her, to go to school in the friendly brick building in west Lincoln.

This new life, though, isn't easy.

Robinson's job at Taco Inn nets a \$160 paycheck every two weeks. She comes to school each day to work with her granddaughter. She has housing assistance and food stamps but they don't always get her to the end of the month.

"I'm trying," she said. "I'm trying so hard. It's hard to ask (for help) when you don't have (what you need)."

But she likes this new place, so different from her home farther south. She is amazed, she said, at what is there for her when she can't make the money stretch. Churches and organizations that offer food and supplies, not judgment.

"They welcomed me to Lincoln with open arms," she said. "I can say, I'm the one to talk to for blessings."

She tries hard to make it work, makes bisquits and gravy and baked goods to last for her and the three young children she's raising.

"I'm a good cooker," she said. "We stretch it."

Sometimes, though it won't stretch that thin, but now there's this: a backpack every Friday, strapped to Vakalya's shoulders.

"On the weekends, I won't have to spend so much money," she said.

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This is new for the Robinsons and the 24 other families at West Lincoln Elementary, all beneficiaries of a burgeoning project that began three years ago as a joint program between Clinton Elementary and the Food Bank of Lincoln.

The first year, backpacks went home with 50 Clinton students.

The next year, the program expanded to 150 students at Clinton, Elliott, McPhee and Everett elementaries.

This year, the number has more than doubled again, with 325 students and two more schools: West Lincoln and Hartley.

With a three-year matching grant from the Community Health Endowment, the Food Bank has added fresh fruit and, once a month, milk and egg vouchers.

Businesses have helped the Food Bank match the grant, church groups and civic organizations have volunteered and raised money, disabled students from LPS's job-training program fill the sacks with food every week.

In all, more than 400 organizations have made gifts to help make sure students can eat when the school lunchroom is closed.

"We've had terrific community support," said Food Bank Director Scott Young. "It's kind of taking on a life of its own."

Marilyn Moore, LPS associate superintendent who helps raise money for the program through her church, thinks people understand this fundamental point: that it's not OK for children to go hungry over the weekend.

"What I say when I speak to community groups is that many times parents are doing the very best they can for their kids. Sometimes parents make bad decisions. But it's not a five-year-old's fault."

And many people, Moore said, have never realized such poverty exists in Lincoln, though teachers and principals have known it for years.

They know each story is different: Jobs that don't pay enough for a family to survive. Illness and mental health problems. Drug and alcohol abuse. And they know there's no easy answer, no simple problem to solve.

"For every backpack there is a unique story," said Hartley Principal Stephanie Lawson. "For each child, the bottom line is, will it solve every problem? No. But it will solve some."

More, perhaps, than people realize.

Once, McPhee Principal Bess Scott said, she listened to a police officer describe the food he'd found in a house he'd visited as part of the Child Protective Services investigation. Peanut butter. Macaroni and cheese. Cereal.

It was on a Thursday, Scott said, nearly a week after a backpack had been sent home with a student.

"I recognized it was what we send home for weekend food," she said. "In our naivete, we think this feeds children just Saturday and Sunday. This family was stretching it to provide nighttime meals."

And the need is bigger than 325 students — and their families.

Last year 4,234 elementary school children at LPS qualified for free lunches, another 1,107 for reduced-price lunches.

That means, said Moore, that more than a third of LPS's elementary school children come from low-income families.

At Everett Elementary, 50 families get backpacks over the weekend this year. Ninety-six families are on the waiting list.

The school keeps a pantry of its own, stocked mostly by teachers who bring food to keep on hand, to help out when something comes up.

"I ran out after the first day of school," said Melody Peterson, a counselor who coordinates the Backpack Program at Everett.

The pantry, she said, is there to help students when something unexpected comes up, before other services kick in to help them.

"Every situation that comes up is one you'd never think of," she said.

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Nicole Eagen, whose two daughters go to Clinton Elementary, never took advantage of the Backpack program because she figured there were other families who needed it more.

Then Transfiguration, the group home where she worked, closed. They hadn't paid her for six weeks before that.

"We had just moved into a house and had to get assistance to pay the rent," she said.

Despite her husband's job, the bills started to pile up and gas prices took a bigger dent out of her family's shrunken budget.

"We were able to eat," she said. "We just didn't have full meals. We might have pizzas one night or tuna and noodles."

And so, her daughters bring home a backpack now.

"It's not much but it does help," she said. It's that one less thing that you have to buy."

Now, Eagen said, she's found a new job. She hopes to be able to let another family take home a backpack later this year.

"Once we get completely on our feet and taken care of, we won't have to do it anymore."

When the program began at Everett, teachers were worried about the stigma that might be attached to taking home a backpack. So they took great pains to make sure it was a part of the routine, where no one was singled out.

But as it has grown, Peterson said, she doesn't think children feel that stigma so much.

"I think that the fact we're talking about food and hunger, they see people not judging them."

De Ann Currin, Elliott's principal, thinks programs like this make the community stronger.

"Our children know this comes from a bigger community, that it comes from someone they don't know who cares about them."

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Bessie Robinson wishes she could buy all the teachers at West Lincoln Christmas presents, to show them just how much she appreciates how they've reached out. Because it has helped so much.

"It's getting better, you know. It's getting better."

Recently, Vakalya got a pass to the Lincoln Children's Museum for doing a good job

in school.

Robinson thought maybe over the weekend, they'd visit, a treat for the family. She knows this much: whatever they do, they'll have something to sustain them.

"I plan to make plans around the backpack this weekend."

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