

Pantry provides food and friendship

“A household of five? That’s up to 35 pounds,” Midge says after welcoming a visitor to the LPS Emergency Pantry on a Wednesday afternoon in late May.

As a collaborative effort between the Food Bank, Leadership Lincoln and Lincoln Public Schools (LPS), the Emergency Pantry opened in 2008 to serve students and their families in need of food.

Midge Dance and Jani Gentry have volunteered at the Pantry every other Wednesday for the last 10 years. In that time, they’ve developed a routine. Midge greets guests, verifies household size and ensures neighbors know how many pounds of food they are welcome to take home.



Jani Gentry (left) and Midge Dance (right) at the LPS Emergency Pantry.

“You’re at 22.5 pounds, so you can get 12.5 more if you’d like. And there’s some items that don’t go toward your weight,” Jani explains, after weighing a couple of food-filled bags. Her role is to weigh the selection and record how much food goes out the door. Jani also checks the baked goods for signs of spoilage—disposing of items as needed.

In-between visitors, the two scan the shelves and report back to Food Bank staff when items are low. They make note of which items move quickly—like “juice!” they both exclaim—and which items tend to stick around a bit longer. They concoct recipes from the available goods, trying to see if they can make a nutritious meal solely from the items on the shelves.

“We can usually come up with something,” Midge explains, as she quickly offers chili as today’s meal.

Midge and Jani haven’t always known each other (though by their rapport, you’d never know that). Midge, a retired teacher, and Jani, a retired registered nurse, were both were looking for ways to give back to the community. They both landed at the Pantry orientation, were paired together, and have been friends ever since.

“Some people apologize for coming here, but we remind them ‘that’s why we’re here,’” Jani explains. “We try to be welcoming and make it as non-threatening as possible,” Midge adds.

And they do.

“You can get eight more pounds if you want to,” Jani says to a mom and daughter visiting the Pantry. “What else does your family like?” she asks as she walks them back to the shelves to help scan the assortment of pasta, canned fruits and vegetables, baked goods and breakfast items available.

“This is my favorite place to come because of the variety,” that guest tells Jani, as she adds a few more items to her bag. Per their routine, Jani finishes weighing the items, records the total, and helps the guests carry bags to their car.

Both explain that until they started volunteering, they didn’t realize how great the need for food assistance was, “how real it is.”

“It’s kind of been my mission the last 10 years,” Midge says, who also helps coordinate her church’s involvement with the Backpack program. “It could be my neighbors (experiencing food insecurity),” Jani adds.

The two enjoy the work, noting there’s “no reason” for them not to keep coming back. We’re grateful to Midge, Jani and all the volunteers and partners who make our Child Hunger Programs possible.

The LPS Emergency Pantry (located at Bryan Community School, 300 S. 48th) is back in action for the 2022-23 school year. It is open from 3-5:30 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday when school is in session. Families may visit the pantry one time per month. To learn more about the Pantry and our other Child Hunger Programs, visit lincolnfoodbank.org.