



A crowd gathers at the Oak City Outreach Center in Raleigh as the Brown Bag Ministry truck arrives with hot meals and brown bag lunches.

Announcing the 2015 *Cary Magazine* Gives Back partner **Brown Bag Ministry**

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– David Legarth,
Brown Bag Ministry

AS MISSIONS GO, it doesn't get much simpler than “Feed the hungry.”

Week after week, year after year, that's what volunteers do at Apex-based Brown Bag Ministry, selected as the 2015 *Cary Magazine* Gives Back partner.

“Christ calls us to feed the hungry,” said David Legarth, board chair of the all-volunteer, faith-based charity. “When someone is willing to wait in line for a bagged lunch, there's a need.

“We serve lunches on Saturdays to fill a gap in the services to the homeless and those living in poverty,” he said. “Our weekly lunch is usually a bologna and cheese sandwich, fruit, a crunchy item like chips or a granola bar, dessert and water.”

While the mission itself may be simple, the coordination behind it is inspiring:

Dennis Ennis Produce of the State Farmers Market donates 12 boxes of fruit weekly. The Produce Box in Cary provides fresh fruit and vegetables in season. Bread of Life Outreach donates 300-plus loaves, and Jersey Mike's Subs #3028 in Apex donates 125 mini subs monthly.

A trip to the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina yields crunchy food items and desserts. Starbucks in Holly Springs provides extra pastries as available. Cheese, water and bags are bought in bulk from Sam's Club, and bologna from Aldi stores. The food is stored in space provided by Raleigh Paving.

Then, each Saturday morning in Apex, volunteers gather at St. Andrew the Apostle Roman Catholic Church to make 1,200

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lunches for the hungry in Raleigh and Durham, who gather at locations including the Oak City Outreach Center near Raleigh's Moore Square, the South Wilmington Street Center, Church in the Woods, and the Helen Wright Center for Women.

Meanwhile, 1,800 more lunches are bagged at four other area churches for same-day distribution to the needy in North Raleigh, Wake Forest, Wendell and Zebulon.

The work happens in collaboration with churches and volunteers of various denominations and faiths.

"One group can't do it all," Legarth said. "This ecumenical effort excites us, the sharing of hope and voice."

Let Hope Fly

Brown Bag Ministry was founded in 2005 by Patricia Hartley of Youngsville and Mary Jo Bukowski of Apex, with 25 bagged lunches prepared in Hartley's kitchen. Bukowski, who has since relocated to New Zealand, earned the 2009 Apex Citizen of the Year award for her efforts.

"Mary Jo was always dropping hints at St. Andrew, about Brown Bag needs," Legarth recalled. "She could squeeze a dime out

How You Can Help

Weekly needs:

- Bologna, turkey or ham lunch meat
- Sliced cheese
- Granola bars
- Bottled water
- Single-serve crackers, chips, pretzels, etc.
- Fruit or boxed raisins
- Large foam plates or bowls
- Hot and cold cups
- Napkins
- Plastic silverware and tablecloths

of a nickel! My firm bought a hot food cart about three years into it, and my family and I have been involved since then."

Legarth is now in his fourth year as board chair and director of the ministry, which declares its belief in the dignity of each individual, advocates for the voiceless, and directs them toward resources for independence.

Also on the board is Joseph Gaitens, who like Legarth, doubles as a Saturday site

coordinator and truck driver. He's created Brown Bag Ministry's brand-new tagline of Let Hope Fly, representing the whole-person effect of the ministry.

"Those who receive our lunches get a meal, but they also walk away knowing, 'Somebody cared about me today,'" Gaitens said. "It's a wonderful gift, to be able to serve."

"How can people help? Pray for us. Serve as a volunteer. Support us financially or with in-kind donations. In that order!"

Brown Bag volunteers include Scout troops and swim teams, students, retirees and families.

"There's no age limit to volunteer," Legarth noted. "If your child can pick up a banana and put it in a bag, he's overqualified!"

Chips & Sandwedges

With an annual budget of \$60,000, Legarth, Gaitens and the Brown Bag board are seeking to build new relationships with the business community, knowing that more dollars can mean more people served. Funding currently comes via community grants, from the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, individuals and other sources.

Donations are accepted through the Unit-

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Volunteers from Girl Scout Troop 63 serve hot lunches at the Oak City Outreach Center in Raleigh.



Volunteers prepare hundreds of lunches for delivery to locations in Raleigh and Durham.

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ed Way of the Greater Triangle, and corporations can choose to match employee giving.

Brown Bag's largest donation to date, \$20,000, came when it earned runner-up status in the 2012 "50 States for Good" contest by Tom's of Maine.

In 2014, Brown Bag held its first organized fundraiser, titled Chips & Sandwedges. The golf tourney will be held again this year on April 19 at Lochmere Golf Club in Cary; sponsorships are available at various levels.

No matter their source, all incoming dollars go to buy food and keep delivery trucks rolling. As a faith-based organization, Legarth and Gaitens say they see God at work even in the finances.

"For example, we had our general liability insurance bill due for \$2,650 and it 'just so happened' we received a donation of \$2,700 from the Cary Rotary Club that week," Legarth said with a smile.

In addition to its weekly lunch pro-



Ten-year-old volunteer Jacob Chuong stacks sandwiches at Brown Bag Ministry in Apex.

gram, Brown Bag Ministry serves hot meals twice a month at the Oak City Outreach Center, using meats from the Food Bank and vegetables from The Produce Box. The meals are prepared by Brown Bag's chef, Josephine

Kmetz, and volunteers.

"We want the hot meals to be the same as what you'd serve at a dinner party at your home," Legarth said. "We're a small operation, but we want to be as professional as we can be."

Other projects of the ministry include providing Christmas Eve gift bags for residents of the South Wilmington Street Center, lunches for the Capital Area Veterans Stand Down event, and participation in Project Homeless Connect. Brown Bag also distributes bags of basic necessities such as soap, washcloths and toothpaste to the less fortunate.

Despite the many facets of food coordination, volunteer scheduling and fundraising, the mission of feeding the hungry is still a simple one for Legarth.

"When I see the faces of the people we serve, I know I'm serving Christ," he said.

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