

Feeding the kids

Barbara and John Clark stamp out hunger, three shopping carts at a time

By Lisa Reisman
lisareisman27@gmail.com

12/17/16

BRANFORD » Perhaps you've encountered a retired couple at Big Y or Stop & Shop or Walmart pushing three shopping carts up and down the aisles, scouring the shelves for cans of Chef Boyardee, juice boxes, and nutrition bars, scrutinizing labels for expiration dates, peanut flour and protein value.

They are Branford's Barbara and John Clark and they're shopping for their kids. All 165 of them.

These kids are students at Tisko, Murphy, and Sliney elementary schools, as well as St. Mary's School, and pre-schoolers at the Family Resource Center.

They're also the direct beneficiaries of Feed Branford Kids (FBK), a self-funded initiative launched in November 2014 to

provide children in need with a bag of non-perishable, kid-friendly foods discreetly placed in their backpacks each Friday to be consumed during the weekend.

That these 165 kids, until then, had been coming to school on Mondays, hungry and without the energy to play or learn, was "shocking" to Barbara, 74, who was doing inventory on the

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(PETER HVIZDAK - NEW HAVEN REGISTER)

John and Barbara Clark, volunteers for Feed Branford Kids at a food storage area in Branford housed in a warehouse courtesy of Cosgrove Construction. The Clarks, of Branford, find the best deals on food, mostly in small containers and shelf staples that are distributed to Branford elementary school children that would otherwise go hungry on weekends.

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supply of raisins amid the lively assembly line of volunteers filling bags with items like milk, canned chicken, and cereal on a recent Wednesday morning at a warehouse on Business Park Drive.

"I've lived in Branford all these years and I had no idea," Barbara said, adding that it was her Branford High School classmate Johanne Pantani who brought attention to the issue and recruited the small army of Wednesday morning bag-packers, many of whom are also from the class of 1960. "I think a lot of us just didn't know."

Now they do. Now they

know that the parents of these kids "often are working two jobs, or don't have a car, or they're not on a bus line" and, as a result, "they can't get to the food pantry the two hours it's open," FBK president Carol Stewart said.

They come from families who are "really trying to make it work, not families who want something for free," said volunteer Pat Andriole, the retired executive director of Branford Counseling Center. "They don't go out to dinner, they don't even go out to McDonald's."

Hence, the FBK policy that no child will be turned away. And that includes the nearly one in four kids in Branford who qualify for free or reduced rate lunches during the

week and would otherwise go hungry on weekends, as well as kids whose families may be just a dollar or so over the income level to qualify for such programs.

Hence, the 165 kids that the Clarks shop for each week. Hence, the undeniable fact that "Barbara and John are irreplaceable," said volunteer Brenda Eldridge, who was loading small containers of fruit cocktail into a bag.

This is a couple that spends their Sunday mornings poring over the papers for coupons and promotions; that makes not infrequent late-night trips to the warehouse to unload boxes of mac & cheese because Michael at ShopRite alerted them to a deal; and knows that the ramen at West Haven's

Walmart is less expensive than the ramen in Branford's.

"We want to make sure the kids get what's nutritious and filling but also food that they'll enjoy," said John, 79, a retired superintendent at Schick Razor. "And we plan the monthly menu so it varies each weekend."

Their efforts haven't gone unnoticed. "Volunteers like Barbara and John, they care so much, they work so hard, and they do it out of their hearts," said Branford resident Kamran Farid, former chief operating officer of Edible Arrangements, who himself has donated in excess of \$40,000 to FBK through his Kamran Farid Foundation.

Farid is one part of a

sturdy network of support, including the Branford Rotary, the Lions Club, and Onofrio's Total Construction, as well as a host of local churches, organizations, and individuals like Sue Barnes and Dan Cosgrove who provided the warehouse, that has FBK contemplating an expansion to Walsh Intermediate School.

"We see these kids and we see our own grandchildren," said Johanne Pantani, who started it all, as the assembly line slowed to a halt. "No child should go hungry, and if we can help one more or 10 more, it's worth it."

Which all depends, of course, on Barbara and John, who were already contemplating their Friday deliveries to the various el-

ementary schools.

At one such delivery, Barbara recalls, a little boy, spotting the bags of food, stopped them. "We love your food," he told them. "We don't have very much at home."

Little signals like that, she said, keep them going, when supplies are running low or a coupon promising a deal doesn't pan out.

Even if it means pushing four shopping carts, it seems.

Food items, preferably single-portion and shelf-steady, can be donated at the Branford Food Pantry, 30 Harrison Ave. For monetary donations, checks should be made out to Feed Branford Kids and sent to P.O. Box 651, Branford, CT 06405.