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## Archived Story

### **Backpack Program focuses on helping young people get enough to eat** ***By Barton Grover Howe For the News-Times***

It is not unkind to say Lincoln City's Roger Robertson talks a lot.

A radio morning show host, spokesperson for various community groups, auctioneer for everyone from the Cascade Head Music Festival to Chinook Winds Casino Resort, his voice is heard often. And while few would say they take it for granted, there is something very familiar about it, no matter what the venue.

Hearing Robertson talk about the Oceanlake Elementary Backpack Program, however, is different.

Talking before the Feb. 9 Chamber of Commerce luncheon, there was a slight waver in the timber of his voice that usually wasn't there. His subject was the cause: Children in Lincoln City without enough to eat.

"I can't tell you how much it bothers me," said Robertson. And as he talks about it nearly two weeks after the meeting, the waver in his sonorous voice comes back. "You know, because it's little children that have nothing," and go hungry as a result.

"It's nothing that they've brought upon themselves. Kids are the most vulnerable amongst us," he said. "That kind of blows the biggest hole in my heart."

But as he continues, Robertson's voice regains its normal timbre. He's begun talking about Karen Dummer, the people at Oceanlake Elementary and the backpack program.

Dummer is a family advocate at Oceanlake Elementary School. A district employee for 19 years, she feels there's always been a need to combat hunger among much of the city's school-age population.

"Part of it is that you have the same child coming to you every day with a stomach ache every afternoon," she said. "Kids that start getting angry every Thursday or Friday before the weekend," when they know it might be days before they get a good meal again at school.

"You see the same kid every day asking other kids for the food they've got, the leftovers on their tray," she said. She's even seen kids hoard food to take home from school. "You start picking up on those things, seeing there's some concerns there."

Although Dummer said the reasons kids go hungry at home are numerous, she said she doesn't just assume it's because of parental neglect. "It can also be the parents aren't aware of what the proper nutrition is."

Regardless of the cause, however, she's always known there was a problem. But only recently - while helping a child do his homework - did a workable solution present itself.

"We were going through the Weekly Reader, and there was an article about kids who get backpacks and take food home," she said. "I asked him if I could keep the Reader.

"He said, 'No; if I don't take this back I get an 'F' on it.'"

A chuckle, photocopy and a trip to the Internet later, Dummer discovered America's Second Harvest. On their website, they call themselves, "The Nation's Foodbank Network." They have guided and supported hundreds of backpack programs around the country via their network of affiliated organizations.

But when Oceanlake leaders started looking into a backpack program, they had a problem, said teacher's assistant Pat Robertson. "Lincoln County's foodbank," she said, "I was told, is really stretched thin. So we did it without it being funded through the traditional ways."

They did it on their own. Seeking support from the community at large, Dummer, school employees like Robertson and other volunteers turned an unfunded idea into the program that is now up and running at Oceanlake Elementary.

Kids are discreetly and confidentially provided a food-filled backpack to ensure they have something to eat during the weekend. Those involved in the program go through a screening process, including a one-on-one interview with Dummer. She also contacts parents, to let them know about the program and the reasons the child is being sent home with a backpack full of food.

Calling it a pilot program, Dummer hopes the entirely homegrown effort will expand into all Lincoln City and Lincoln County schools, "once all the kinks are worked out." According to Robertson, however, what she's seen come through the doors of her school already indicates the kinks could be small ones. "We're getting an overwhelming response from the community," she said.

"Businesses have literally set aside so much a week for this," which has kept her husband, Roger, just as busy picking up and delivering as it has talking. Chinook Winds Casino Resort, The Dorchester House and Samaritan North Lincoln Hospital are just a few of the places where he's already made stops.

And businesses aren't the only ones giving, she said. "We have one family that has designated so much a month coming out of their checkbook to go to the school," she said. "Just like they pay their electric bill, they pay us.

"We are challenging anyone else to do that, too."

All of it, she said, has resulted in a response Robertson calls, "overwhelming," making it possible for the first set of backpacks to go out on Friday, Feb. 16 to 28 different children. Robertson doesn't know if all of them will need help again; "You know, some of them may continue, some may not."

Whatever the case, Robertson sees all kinds of benefits from the program, beyond just feeding kids. "We talk to them; we're trying to teach our kids good eating habits," she said. "We do all of it on a positive note because the need is there."

For Roger Robertson, it's the actions of people like his wife, Dummer and other volunteers that keeps what he does in perspective. He doesn't see his role as any more important than anyone else's, just different. "It is an ability to do something good with the voice that I've got," he said.

"Anybody that was in the same position would avail themselves of it as well." In any case, he's just happy people are willing to listen.

" I am honored to give a voice to those that don't have one."

To arrange for a pick up of donated items, contact Pat Robertson or Karen Dummer at Oceanlake Elementary School at 994-5296. Goods can also be dropped off at the school at 2420 NE 22nd St.

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Why help: Backpack food programs have been shown to:

- Increase attendance
- Decrease behavior problems
- Improve concentration abilities of students
- Improve student academic achievement.

How you can help:

- Volunteer to pick up food
- Fill backpacks
- Collect food items
- Donate food
- Donate money to purchase food
- Organize a pantry shelf
- Maintain records of food distributed

Backpack program wish list: Foods must be kid-friendly, stable on shelves, easy to prepare and nutritionally sound. Some suggestions:

Bread  
Peanut Butter  
Jelly  
Macaroni & cheese  
Spaghettios  
Small boxes of real fruit juice  
Sugar-free cereals  
Complete pancake mix (just add water)  
Easy-to-open cans of tuna  
Tuna Helper  
Pop Tarts  
Pudding cups  
Chicken noodle soup  
Cup o' Noodles  
Snack-sized fruit cups  
Fruit snacks  
Apple & oranges  
Protein bars  
Crackers  
Powdered milk  
Rice or soy milk

- Source: Oceanlake Elementary Backpack Program