

Mom helps launch backpack-food program for kids

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Parker Wood White, a young mother soon expecting her second child, returned to Greensboro in 2008 after an exciting, demanding life of working for three senators in Washington.

Her daughter, Avery, was seven months old when she and her husband, Robert, returned to her hometown of Greensboro. "Once I had Avery," White said, "I knew that I wanted to do something that made a big impact on children and our community."

White, a 1997 Page High graduate, has been instrumental in establishing the first BackPack program in Guilford County affiliated with Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest NC and Feeding America's national BackPack program.

This program addresses childhood hunger by providing school-age children at risk of hunger with backpacks full of nutritious, nonperishable, child-friendly foods to take home over the weekends during the school year. Examples include cereals, milk, fruits, juices and proteins.

Of the many students who qualify for free or reduced breakfasts and lunches, some are receiving few meals at home over the weekends.

In the summer of 2009, White contacted the Guilford County school system to see if the county had an organized BackPack program.

She found that some local churches were doing a wonderful job of helping students in local schools, but there was not an organized national program in Greensboro.

By partnering with Second Harvest Food Bank and Guilford Child Development's Learning Together Family Literacy Program, the BackPack program was launched in January at Wiley Elementary School and Shiloh Head Start.

The program now feeds 50 students at Wiley Elementary and 15 4-year-olds at Shiloh.

In the fall, the plan is to continue feeding the children at Wiley and to increase the number of participants at Shiloh to 50 as well.

The school principal, social worker and teachers identify the neediest children in the school, and participants' names are kept strictly confidential.

The backpacks are discreetly distributed on the last day before the weekend or school holiday.

"Guilford Child Development is my partner agency throughout all of this," White said. "They are my link to Second Harvest, since I don't have my own 501c3 (nonprofit status)."

This program has just been approved to become a Charitable Purpose Fund under the umbrella of The Community Foundation of Greensboro. Soon, interested donors can find more information about this program on The Community Foundation's Web site.

White has raised enough money in the past four months to cover the 65 children enrolled in the program this semester and 100 children in the program during the next school year.

"This has been done by the generous support of individuals, local foundations, a local church, and other generous donors," White said.

Fundraising is done by White on a weekly basis because she knows the only way the children can be fed is through the help of

generous donors.

She said it costs approximately \$150 to feed a child per year. This is less than \$5 a child per weekend of food.

“The more money we raise,” she said, “the more schools and students we can feed.”

In Greensboro, the problem of childhood hunger is fairly large, she said.

According to Guilford County School's Nutrition Office, 52.8 percent of children in our school system — about 37,000 children — receive free or reduced lunches.

Statistics show it takes children two and a half days after they start eating well again for them to retain what they are learning, White said.

“Childhood hunger not only affects a child's health, but also their education and job readiness,” she said.

White's work and the training she received while working for Sens. Jesse Helms, Bill Frist and Richard Burr probably helped her know how to move forward in accomplishing her set goals.

“White is a young lady who saw beyond her own comfort level and sought to change the world by helping feed children,” said John Graham, deputy director of Guilford Child Development in Greensboro.

“She investigated the Backpack program, raised funds for backpacks, and then partnered with nonprofits to make it happen in Guilford County,” he said.

White said she wants to sustain the Backpack program for many years to come and hopes to make it bigger and better.

“Down the road, I hope to hold food/supply drives to even make a larger impact on the lives of hungry Guilford County children,” she said.

To suggest a person or organization who is “Making a Difference” in Guilford County, contact Peggy Longmire at rlongmire@triad.rr.com or 288-9040.