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Food for the Soul

Service program teaches youths to put their troubled past behind them

By DAVID PERRY, Sun Staff

LOWELL -- As darkness approaches, four teens and two supervisors stack bags of food on the outside steps of Bishop Markham housing in Lowell.

The food is from the Merrimack Valley Food Bank's mobile food pantry.

The supervisors are from the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps' Lawrence Community Re-entry Center.

The kids are from Lawrence, and re-entry program officials hope the food deliveries will teach the kids something to put their troubled past behind them.

The buzzer lets them in.

Mercedes and Montana, both 16, Harry, 17, and Alex, 14 (not their real names), move the food indoors, where it will be sorted and delivered to seven addresses.

About five years ago, Corinne St. Hilaire got the call. St. Hilaire, program director of the Merrimack Valley Food Bank, said the Lawrence Community Re-entry Center called to ask "if we had anything the kids could do for community service."

"And all this time later, they're still here," she adds. "And I've never had a complaint. Everybody loves them."

She tells them to be armed with one tool -- a "big smile."

The kids, ages 12 to 21, have been referred by the Department of Youth Services to the Lawrence Community Re-entry Center for a variety of infractions, from car theft and armed robbery to parole violations. (The Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps also runs the 16-bed Fay A. Rotenberg School in North Chelmsford, the state's only secure, long-term facility for troubled girls, as well as the Eliot Center Community Outreach program in Lowell, a day program for boys and girls ages 12-21.)

The work the kids from Lawrence will do this day -- picking up the bags of food and delivering it to homebound folks, mostly elders -- is part of their 20 hours of community service.

They are a welcome respite from the uninvited solitude, to some of those who get the food, these kids are their only visitors. The food bags, delivered once a month, include everything from strudel to fresh or canned vegetables, bread and instant mashed potatoes. (The kids make weekly deliveries to a rotating list of recipients.)

"They wouldn't be getting the food otherwise," says St. Hilaire.

The mobile food pantry, the only one of its kind in the state, according to St. Hilaire, delivers food to those who are too immobile to get it on their own.

"It's really a supplemental program, to help them stretch their dollar," she says.

The program serves 198 households, which includes 257 people who meet federal poverty guidelines in the Greater Lowell area. While there is no age requirement, about 85 percent of the program participants are elderly.

The kids show up at the food bank on Broadway Street, load the food into their van and, with program supervisor George Lenotte and community monitor Jason Price, haul it to homes throughout the area.

"Some of the kids are still in school, some work, and some are in our GED program," says Lisa Augusta, program director of the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps Lawrence Community Re-Entry Center.

This is part of their re-entry after residential care. All have been court-referred, and this is their community service.

"In the past, the kids have told us it makes them feel good to do something for someone else, especially those who can't do it for themselves," says Augusta. "And some do it and don't say much, but you can tell they enjoy what they're doing. And with this program, it's not uncommon for them to ask, 'When are we going to deliver food to the elderly?'"

"This is the type of service you don't need to drag them to," says Lenotte, the program supervisor. "It's not hard labor. I could have had 10 kids today for this, easy."

"Even the tough guys" seem softer after the deliveries, says Price.

Mercedes, the 16-year-old girl, has done this perhaps a dozen times, though she's not certain of the number.

"These old people didn't do nothing to me," she says in the van on the way to the housing facility. "They're nice. And somebody's gotta help 'em out. And if we don't, who will?"

Lenotte and Price shout out the numbers and names that correspond to the day's deliveries, and the kids organize the bags.

They knock on the first door. No answer.

Down the hall, Beverly Reslow, 71, is home.

"Come on in," she says. The door opens to her front room, which smells of cigarette smoke and is dark but for Judge Judy meting out justice on the large TV.

"I've never in my life met a better bunch of kids," she says. "They're a tremendous help."

Since she broke a hip and a leg more than a year ago, she can "barely make it to the mailbox, let alone get to the store."

One sweltering summer day, she offered the kids a cold Coke.

"Sorry, ma'am," one boy said. "We're not allowed to take anything."

That impressed Reslow.

"Just nice kids," she says.

Montana and Mercedes leave her food, they smile.

Alex, the 14-year-old, hardly musters a peep the whole time. Like the others, he'll say only that he's here on a "violation" of his probation.

"I just bring 'em the food and leave," he says.

Years ago, Irene Callicut, 78, broke her hip and "I can't even walk across the street. This food helps a lot. I see some different (kids) this time, but they're all nice."

"By this time in the month, I've spent most of the money on bills," says Bettie Serfes, 80, who lives with her two sons. "Having this come once a month, this stretches it until we get our checks. The kids are wonderful. So polite. You don't see many young people that way, or doing something like this. They deserve a lot of credit."

"I could do this all day," says Montana, after a delivery on the fifth floor.

Alex and Harry knock on the door of Jenny Lynn Jay, a 51-year-old woman who suffers from osteoarthritis. Her fox terrier, Rex, bounces around the apartment like a superball.

"Stick your hand out," she tells Harry.

He does.

Rex sniffs, approves.

Jay sets off on a long, rapid-fire yarn about her former job ("outsourced to Portugal"), former husbands, her sons, the dog, her illness and her former work as a soup-kitchen volunteer.

The kids stand patiently, smiling.

"It's wonderful for me," Jay said. "I can only walk so far. Oh, these kids are always nice."

It's the last delivery.

"Hey, maybe she don't have a lot of visitors," Mercedes says on the way back to the van.

"I just like helping the old people, you know?" says Harry, 17. "I think about my mom and when she's old, maybe if she needs help. I like to think somebody would do the same for her."

"I didn't realize until recently how much these (kids) were loved until I called people," says the food bank's St. Hilaire. "I was told they offer to put stuff away and are very polite. It doesn't matter so much where they come from."