

Jocelyn Wolfe (second from right) and her children, Michaela, 17; Benjamin, 15; Elijah, 14; Johanna, 12; and Ami, 7, volunteer together at the Central and Northeast Missouri Food Bank once every month.



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PHILANTHROPY AS A FAMILY

FROM THE OLDEST SIBLINGS TO THE YOUNGEST IN THE BUNCH, COLUMBIA FAMILIES ARE TEACHING THEIR KIDS TO HAVE A HEART FOR OTHERS.

BY VICKI HODDER
PHOTOS BY ANTHONY JINSON



Gwen Staples (second from right) and her four children, Kendra, 17; Katie, 15; Jon, 13; and Carissa, 11, come to Columbia from Hallsville each month to volunteer together.

Often the issue of hunger brings places such as Haiti or developing nations to mind. But it's also a very local concern, as the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri administrators attest. Client visits throughout the Food Bank's 32-county service region have jumped by 21 percent since last year, and the amount of food distributed in Boone County by Nov. 1 of this year had already exceeded last year's total by nearly 5 percent, says Scott Gordon, the Food Bank's communications coordinator. In Columbia, the Food Bank's Central Pantry on Big Bear Boulevard is serving 21 percent more families than it did last year, Gordon says.

Those numbers have a hands-on significance for two area families who for years have volunteered together at the Food Bank. Jocelyn Wolfe and her five children, ranging in age from 7 to 17 years, and Gwen Staples and her four children, between 11 and 17 years old, spend an hour each month together repackaging food for distribution to the Food Bank's clients. Jocelyn's husband, Chris, and Gwen's husband, Danny, join them when their work schedules permit. Both families say they learn compassion as well as teamwork while they enjoy working with their friends.

"I feel like we have a lot of material things, so I needed them [the children] to see that pov-

erty's not a Third World problem, that it's right here with us," Gwen says, "for them to appreciate growing up the way they were and to be able to help people who need a hand up."

GWEN AND HER CHILDREN started regularly volunteering at the Columbia Food Bank in 2006 with family friends. When those friends moved to Texas a year or two later, Gwen asked the Wolfe family to join them. It was a good fit for both the Food Bank and her children, Gwen says. The Wolfs' children — Michaela, 17; Benjamin, 15; Elijah, 14; Johanna, 12; and Ami, 7 — are close in age to the Staples' children, Ken-

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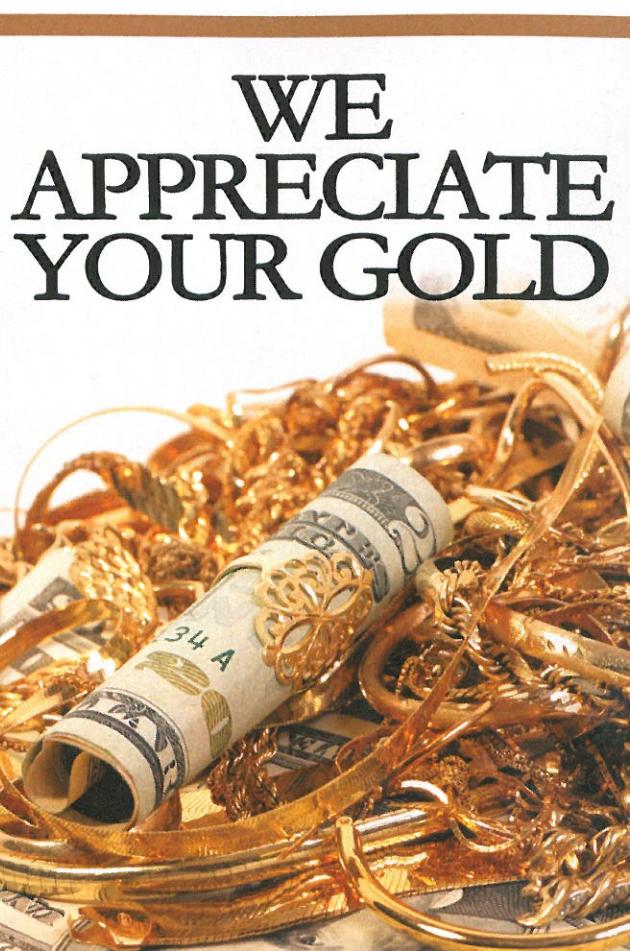
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dra, 17; Katie, 15; Jon, 13; and Carissa, 11, of Hallsville.

Jocelyn was glad to find a family volunteer opportunity in which she could include all her children. "It's something we can all do with our varying ages, with our multi-aged group," says Jocelyn, who lives just south of Columbia. "This we can do as a family."

And it's something they can do as friends. Jon Staples looks forward to getting together with the Wolfes, and Johanna and Michaela both describe volunteering at the Food Bank with their friends as fun. Gwen and Jocelyn agree that pairing the children up with friends adds to the appeal of volunteering.

"It's like extra time hanging around with them, but we're still doing something and not just kicking around," Katie says.

The youths also hone their abilities to work cooperatively with other family members as they volunteer. As Kendra notes, repackaging the food requires teamwork: Tasks such as filling bags with food, closing and labeling the bags and counting and boxing them all go into creating a sort of assembly line for repackaging the food. The older children might help the younger kids, such as Ami, with their particular jobs, which creates what Michaela describes as a "family experience, learning to work together."

AMONG THE YOUNG volunteers' favorite food pantry jobs is preparing Buddy Packs, backpacks filled with nutritious food that eligible school children take home each week to supplement weekend or holiday meals. Carissa likes the rhythm of her volunteer team as she works with

them to fill the backpacks, and Johanna imagines the children who receive the backpacks as she works on them.

That focus on others is what both Jocelyn and Gwen hope their children will bring home from their volunteering.

"We are Christians, and we want to follow Christ's example of taking care of the needs of others and showing our love and our compassion that way," Jocelyn says. "So I want to instill that in my children when they're young so that as they're older, they're also helping those in the community."

Gwen also aims to ensure her children spend a portion of their lives giving to others. There's a temptation to be self-focused and extremely judgmental toward others, she says, that serving as a resource to others helps mitigate. Volunteering allows the family "to see that there's so much more going on in peoples' lives than what we see in that little window of their lives," she adds.

FOR ALL THE VALUE family volunteering provides, Kendra's first bit of advice for other families considering working together as volunteers is to not be overwhelmed. "Just fit it into your schedule; it doesn't need to be something that takes over everything," she says.

Gwen offers suggestions based on experience for launching a family volunteering effort. Parents should start by making the commitment to sacrifice the time volunteering requires, she says, and then establish it as part of what their families do — not negotiable or optional. Approach the volunteer time with the right attitude, and children will follow suit, she adds.

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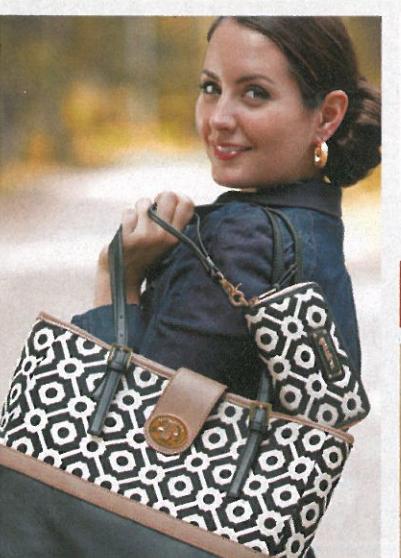
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"Also, I think it helps to find something that fits and works with you," Gwen says, noting that volunteer activities that can be done at home might work better than volunteering outside the home for some families. "There are so many possibilities; there's something for everybody."

Places to Volunteer with Children

- **Boone County Council on Aging Adopt-A-Yard Program:** Help seniors with yard work, from mowing lawns to shoveling snow, either seasonally or for the year. Helping hands for one-time projects also are welcome. Contact Jessica Macy at 573-443-1111 for more information.
- **Boone County Council on Aging Friendly Visiting Program:** Provide companionship and support to seniors who are living alone in their own homes. Schedules and commitment are open ended, though the council suggests volunteering an hour a week. Contact Jessica Macy at 573-443-1111 for more information.
- **Cedar Creek Therapeutic Riding Center:** Help with barn chores, or for children 12 years and older, work with horses in two-hour weekly shifts at the Cedar Creek riding center, 4895 E. Highway 163. Call 573-875-8556 or visit cedarcreek.missouri.org/home/volunteers for more information.
- **The Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri "Kids Helping Kids" Day:** The Food Bank sponsors a handful of "Kids Helping Kids" volunteer days each year geared toward youngsters between 4 and 10 years old. The next "Kids Helping Kids" Day, in which families will repackage cereal or snack products for the Food Bank's Buddy Pack program, is Saturday, Dec. 7. Contact Melanie Lake at 573-4102 or melaniel@sharefoodbringhope.org to sign up for one of the three two-hour shifts available that day.
- **Second Chance:** Play with and care for dogs or cats on the weekend at the group's adoption center, 24687 Highway 179. Come when you're able between noon and 5 p.m. Saturdays or between 1 and 5 p.m. on Sundays, or e-mail columbiasecondchance@hotmail.com to make an appointment. Check the group's website at columbia2ndchance.org for more information.
- **Voluntary Action Center:** Families can volunteer in two-hour shifts to help collect and distribute Christmas gifts for low-income Boone County families on Dec. 9, 10 or 12, as well as on Dec. 16, 17 or 19. Contact Leslie Pitchford at 573-874-2273 to get involved.

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