

KIWANIS MAGAZINE

TELLING THE KIWANIS STORY

Feeding a need



A Kiwanian in Florida makes it her mission to combat food insecurity.

Story by Jennifer Morlan • Photos by Octavian Cantilli

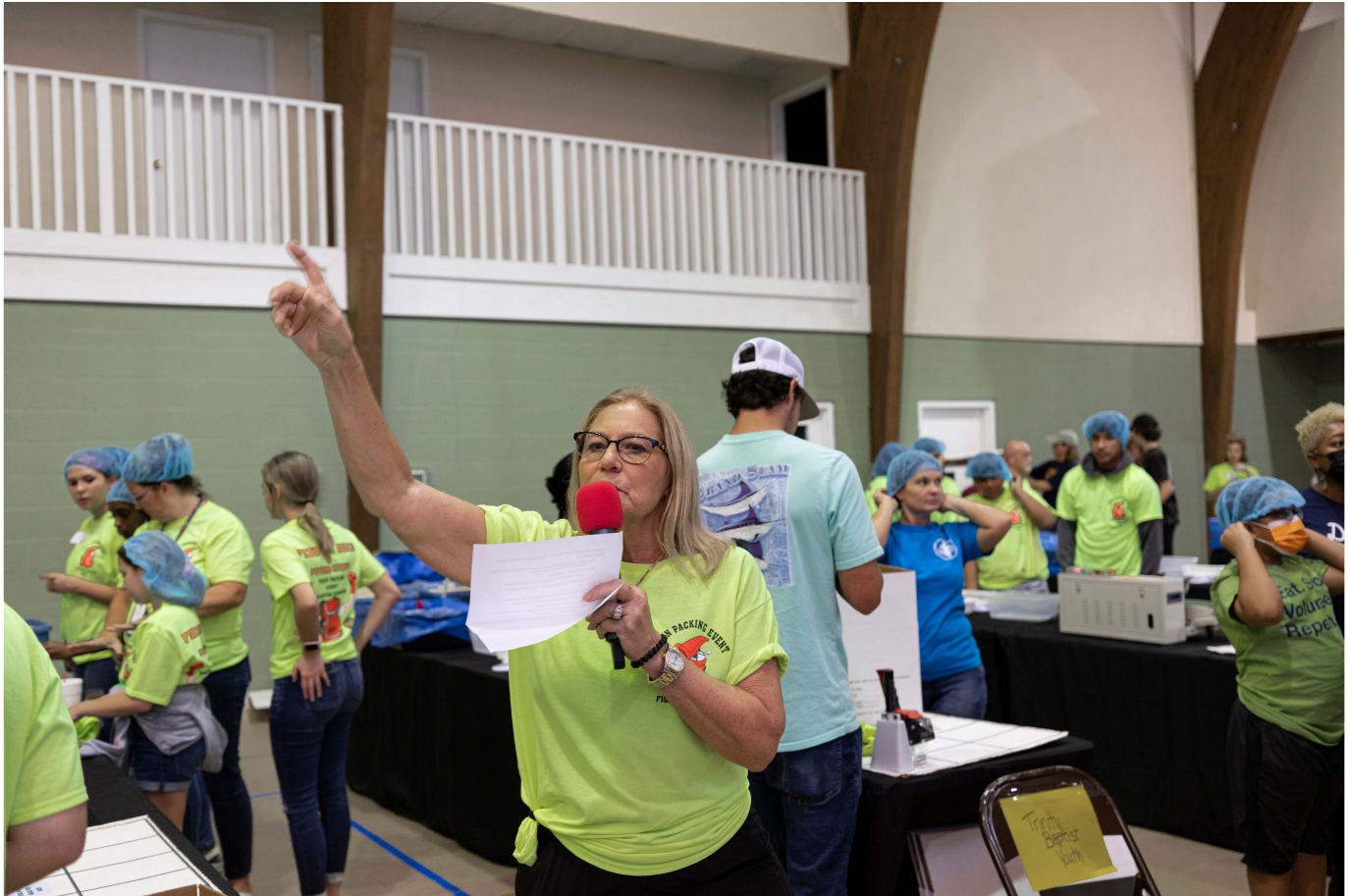
The anecdotes are easy for Denise Bramlitt to recall.

A little boy lingering in an elementary school cafeteria after lunch, stuffing leftover food into his pockets to take home to his younger siblings. A teen nibbling on grass behind the high school to try to curb her hunger. A little girl found walking alone to school because she knows that if she

doesn't attend classes on Friday, she won't get the backpack full of food that tides her and her sister over until Monday.

These are stories about children in Putnam County, Florida, but similarly heartbreaking examples can be found almost anywhere.

When confronted with such realities, many of us would write a check or take a bag of canned goods to a local food pantry. But not Bramlitt.



Denise Bramlitt

During the darkest days of her life, Bramlitt, a member of the Kiwanis Club of Azalea City, made it her mission to address childhood hunger in her community. Today, she spearheads a countywide movement that ensures more than 800 kids have something to eat during the weekends.

“We’re a poor county,” Bramlitt says, “but we’re also a community that cares.”

Using the warehouse of the business she owns, Bramlitt Plumbing & Electric, she founded Feed the Need of Putnam County in 2018. With a dedicated core of volunteers and “walking daily on my blind faith,” Bramlitt collects and distributes more than 172,000 meals each year through backpack programs in 14 schools. She applies for grants, organizes fundraisers and rescues food from restaurants and grocery stores to fill the 3,500-square-foot space with pallets of macaroni and cheese, canned meats, applesauce, juice boxes, granola bars and more.

“Denise is a force of nature,” says Rick Surrency, superintendent of Putnam County Schools and a fellow Kiwanian. “She can get more out of people — financially, labor, emotionally — than anyone else.”

Surrency is thankful Bramlitt is using that energy and passion to help his students, 85% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Almost a quarter of the county’s population lives in poverty — twice the national average, according to the Florida Department of Health, which ranks Putnam County as 66th out of 67 counties for overall health.

“Middle-class America just doesn’t understand that kids go hungry at home,” Surrency says.

And a kid who is hungry is a student who is going to have trouble learning. Research has shown that children who don’t know where their next meal will come from are more likely to repeat a grade and face other educational and emotional challenges.

“It’s hard to focus in school when your stomach is growling,” Surrency says.

That’s why Denise Bramlitt and Feed the Need are so vital to the school district, says Rebecca Motes.



A former Palatka High School guidance counselor, Motes helped students create a resource closet at the high school filled with food from Feed the Need. Almost 100 students per week use the closet to fill the gaps in what they get at home, Motes says. Many of them live with working parents whose incomes don’t stretch far after paying rent, utilities and insurance.

“Because of Feed the Need, our students have direct access to food items they desperately need,” says Motes. “All the (area) schools have access to this. All they have to do is reach out to Miss Bramlitt. If they have a room to store the food, FTN will make sure students have food.”

People in Putnam County are used to reaching out to Bramlitt, owner of Bramlitt Plumbing & Electric since 1979, for help. She’s also served on the boards of the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce and St. John’s River State College — in addition to her work with Kiwanis.

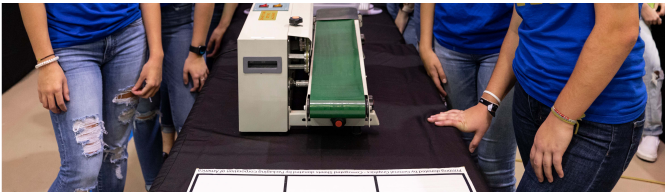
But it was a tragedy in 2007 that led Bramlitt to focus on childhood hunger. That year, her 20-year-old son, Cade, was killed in a car accident.

“When he died, I questioned my belief in God: ‘Why take Cade?’” she remembers thinking. For years, she said the world haunted her.

After her grandchild was born, she knew she needed to pull herself up. She started praying: “If you cure me, I will be at your will.” She says it took a year of continuously asking for a purpose. One thing kept coming to her — food insecurity.

Now Bramlitt relies on her faith and her community to feed children.





In addition, a grant from the Kiwanis Children’s Fund helped the Azalea City club pull off one of Feed the Need’s biggest events.

Held annually, Teen Hunger Fight brings together 200 teens from local churches and other organizations. With the Children’s fund grant, Feed The Need purchased enough food and supplies for the volunteers to pack 32,000 meals in one night.

Club members also came out in force, donning hair nets and masks to fill packets of macaroni and cheese, as well as oatmeal and brown sugar, for Feed the Need’s backpack programs.

It was a gratifying moment for Bramlitt. Before joining Kiwanis, she had been approached for years by civic organizations. She acknowledges that they all do good work and have great values. But it was Kiwanis’ focus on children that spurred her to join.

“Kiwanis and I are really the perfect fit,” she says.

This story originally appeared in the March 2022 issue of Kiwanis magazine.

Club Profile, Feature Story, service, Signature Project

2 thoughts on “Feeding a need”

1. Ed Cleveland

says:

March 1, 2022 at 7:06 pm

Sunrise Kiwanis Club and the Bradenton Kiwanis Club will come together on March 19th and put together another 50,000 meals to help kids and families in the Manatee County area. We do generally 4 times a year when not prevented to gather by a pandemic!

2. Penny Linneweh

says:

March 2, 2022 at 6:36 pm

For the last four years, the Kiwanis Club of Glen Ellyn has been partnering with our local food pantry to provide Snack Packs for food insecure children in our community. Working with the social workers in 12 schools, these packs are given to children on Friday so they have extra food for the weekend. Our community is fairly affluent but still have 20% of our grade school children qualifying for free lunch. A hungry child in a well to do community can easily slip thru the cracks and not get the extra food they need. This is a project that every community should have and it fits the mission of Kiwanis to a tee.

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