

YOUTH SERVICES

Fighting to end food insecurity



Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

Nikki Jones, founder of Beyond Fostering, hosts school-age children as part of her new nonprofit Beyond the Lunch Box.

By Lindsay Peyton
CORRESPONDENT

Nikki Jones wanted to think outside the box. In this case, the lunch box.

A longtime volunteer at Loaves and Fishes, she was well aware of the importance of fighting food insecurity. She was especially concerned about the welfare of children who can leave school hungry and not be fed for hours until their parents return from work.

“Kids eat at noon, or sometimes 11 a.m., and not again until 6 or 7 p.m.,” Jones said. “There could be eight hours that kids have not eaten. And what if there’s no food at home? We wanted to bridge the gap.”

She envisioned providing hot meals to children after school and in the summer, but she also wanted to do more. That’s why she chose the name “Beyond the Lunch Box” when starting her program seven years ago.

Not only is she feeding students, but she is also creating a safe space for them to stay until their family gets home.

Volunteers also offer enriching activities like dance, cooking and photography lessons.

“The kids come straight to us, eat and have snacks,” Jones said. “It’s not just one meal. They can eat until they are full. That way, food isn’t on their mind, and they don’t have to go to bed hungry.”

The program feeds kids across Houston through 21 hubs around the city, mainly

Beyond the Lunch Box offers kids nourishing meals as well as a variety of after-school activities

housed inside participating schools.

Helping foster families

Children are also able to come to the headquarters of Beyond Fostering, the nonprofit Jones started in 2018. Beyond the Lunch Box operates under the organization’s umbrella.

Beyond Fostering makes it possible for foster parents to provide the children under their care with the same opportunities as their peers.

“The main thing is giving kids a sense of normalcy,” Jones said.

Children might want to see a movie with friends, sign up for karate or head to summer camp, all expenses that can be draining.

“For a foster parent, the monthly stipend they get doesn’t cover it,” Jones said. “I’m the vehicle to go out and advocate.”

Beyond Fostering offers a number of services, from providing school supplies year-round to taking children on a field trip to an Astros game. There’s also a Santa’s workshop, which brings presents to about 300 children a year.

What sets the organization apart is its focus on all the children in the family, she said.

“Most agencies only cater to kids in foster care,” Jones said. “But say the family has one child in foster care and another child who has been adopted, or a bio child.”

She does not want the rest

of the family to be left out.

“We wanted to open up our program to all kids,” Jones said. “If they get adopted or age out, they’re still part of Beyond. Every child gets to participate.”

A similar dream propelled her to create Beyond the Lunch Box — expanding services to any child in need of food.

The program runs from 3 to 6:30 p.m. on weekdays. Children are invited to eat as much, and stay as long as they want, for no charge. Those who show up at the door, Jones said, live nearby the office’s location at 507 N. Sam Houston Parkway.

When she realized that some of the children were walking from farther distances, with some on busy streets, she decided the time had come to expand operations.

“We just acquired a place off Greens Road, right across the street from Greenspoint Mall,” Jones said. “We picked that area because there are 20-plus apartments along that road.”

The building needs work, she said. “We have to clean, paint, get fixtures. It’s going to take a lot to get it where it needs to be,” she said. “But we’re just grateful to have it.”

Jones hopes to open the space, located at 375 Greens Road, in the fall.

In the meantime, she and her 12-member staff are busy writing menus, cooking and delivering meals.

“It’s a big operation,” she

said. “There are a lot of parts in play.”

Beyond the Lunch Box operates with food donations. The Houston Food Bank and Jason’s Deli have been major supporters over the years.

Jones is also seeking the support of corporate donors and individuals who can help the organization serve more youths.

“For years, I spent my own money to make sure kids could eat,” she said. “Then we started getting more donations. Now we want to grow.”

A family tradition of giving

Jones, who is also a financial consultant and life coach, is originally from Beaumont; she moved to Houston at age 19 and currently lives in Tomball.

She draws inspiration from her mother, the late Beulah Horne, who was also a foster and adoptive parent.

“I saw her raising everybody,” Jones said.

She remembers her mother taking food to the homeless, slipping money to her family members and taking in children who needed a place to stay.

Now it’s Jones’ turn to carry the torch. She is constantly on the search for ways to serve.

“My mind is always going to what I can do next, how I can help,” she said. “If I see a need, it’s like, ‘How do you fix this?’”

And if Jones doesn’t see anyone else taking on the cause, she steps up.

“I’m just going to do it,” she said. “I take it on. I put thought into it. I research. Then I put my best foot forward.”

She doesn’t get overwhelmed by facing multiple challenges.

“I get one thing solidified and something else pops up,” she said. “There’s always a need for something.”

Janis Aldridge has served on the Beyond Fostering board since 2018; she watched as Jones created the Beyond the Lunch Box program.

“Not everyone is built that way,” Aldridge said. “It takes a special person, with kindness, love and a lot of patience. And I guarantee you something else is already burning in her mind. You never know what she is going to do next.”

Aldridge is impressed with Jones’ ability to take on several challenges.

“Somehow, she finds the strength, and it’s a beautiful thing,” Aldridge said. “I think Houston as a whole is lucky to have someone like her, who has no limits, who pushes and grinds. She’s the type of person who would just give the shirt off her back.”

Helping children keeps Jones energized.

“I can’t imagine what these kids are going through being hungry. I can go home and open the fridge. These kids can’t,” Jones said. “If I can’t do anything else, I can feed you. Food touches the soul — and these kids bring me joy.”

How to help

To donate food or funds, or learn more about the organization, visit beyondthelunchbox.org.



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