



*Backpacks for students during the Back to School Bash (William Wotring/The Dominion Post file photo).*

COMMUNITY, LATEST NEWS

# Christian Help and Pantry Plus More planning backpack giveaways for Back to School

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The first day of school in Monongalia County is now a month away, and that means the backpacks are coming to roost at Christian Help and Pantry Plus More.

Both organizations are hosting giveaways in early August of backpacks brimming with notebooks, pens, Crayons and other essentials.

Pantry Plus More's event is Aug. 6 at Mylan Park. The giveaway at Christian Help will run Aug. 8-12.

The idea, both agencies said, is to help families in an economy already uncertain by COVID, and made even more so now by the war in Ukraine.

The mission, both agencies said, is made even more meaningful, as both exist on donations from the community.

Dollars buy school supplies.

And the cans of vegetables and boxes of pasta that keep the shelves on the food banks at both agencies from gathering dust.

“We’re blessed,” Colleen Lankford said. “This region has been very generous to us.”

Lankford is Christian Help’s current executive director.

“Current,” given the longevity of the ecumenical outreach organization on Walnut Street that serves those in need.

Christian Help began its altruistic life in 1975 in a little storefront on Beechurst Avenue, overlooking the rails of WVU’s Personal Rapid Transit system.

The PRT went on-line that same year, coincidentally, and, as Lankford said, both are in the business of moving people forward.

Christian Help had its beginnings in the Roman Catholic community here.

It was co-founded by the Rev. John DiBacco, a now-retired priest who ministered at parishes in the University City; and Sister Thecla Shiel, an Ursuline nun who grew up in poverty near Scotts Run and was principal of Morgantown’s St. Francis Grade School at the time.

A high school kid helped start Pantry Plus More.

Roark Sizemore, now a WVU student and community activist, came up with idea back at Morgantown High School, as he was beginning to notice the money chasm between the “haves” and “have-nots,” among his classmates.

Morgantown, the municipality, is a place where the rich kids daily rub shoulders with the other kids who aren’t as economically fortunate, he said.

It’s a place where gated communities rub property lines with mobile home parks.

Pantry Plus More is headquartered on Rousch Drive in Westover, and is also a presence in Monongalia County’s school district, where students can “shop” among the offerings without feeling self-consciousness.

Poverty can hit one-in-five children in Mon County, according to the organization’s website. That comes out to around 2,700 youngsters who are food-insecure — meaning that, nutritionally, they simply don’t get enough to eat.

When it comes to back to school, most students, Sizemore said on the website, “Are able to walk in feeling confident with fresh haircuts, new shoes, a special new outfit and a new backpack with all their supplies.”

It gets worse, both he and Lankford said, when that ground-level esteem carries over into adulthood.

To learn about how your child can receive a backpack, or how you can donate or volunteer, visit both organizations on the web and social media.