

HELPING OTHERS

SHE STARTED AS A VOLUNTEER... AND NOW LEADS THE GANG

BY KRISTEN LOWE

DEB HAASE IS PROUD to be following in the footsteps of one of Traverse City's most well-known and beloved residents: Father Fred. In 1989, he established the Father Fred Foundation, which has been helping individuals and families who have immediate needs ranging from food to boots to keeping the heat on.

Today, "Father Fred" serves about 75 families a day. But at the height of the recession in 2009, they were seeing more than 200 a day.

"It's very humbling to think that I'm sitting in the chair that Father Fred once sat in," Deb said. "It can be very emotional." But Deb, who is currently the executive director, wasn't always the boss. She started out as a volunteer.

Getting Involved

In 2006, Deb volunteered for a day with her husband at the Father Fred Frostbite Food Drive. That's where an organizer suggested Deb become a regular volunteer. Deb, who was taking time off from work during her son's senior year, thought volunteering made sense.

Deb started out greeting clients that came into the Foundation, pointing them in the right direction to get help.

Eventually, she began to fill in for Monsignor Thome, who was the chaplain and client assistance administrator. Deb would meet with any person who came in with a financial issue. She'd listen to their story, and would have to make a decision on the spot on whether Father Fred could offer assistance.

"You would see how hard these people were working to make ends meet and try to provide for their families," she said. "That was the most challenging part."

The job eventually became permanent about a year after Monsignor Thome stepped down. Deb worked as the client assistance manager for eight years before being promoted to executive director in 2014.

Whom They Serve

As client assistance administrator, Deb has seen how hard it can be to break the cycle of poverty.

"I think a lot of people have such misconceptions about people who need help," she said. "These people are so hard working and experiencing such difficulties, and they make sure their kids have food before they do."

Deb said most of the people who walk through the Foundation's doors are working, sometimes more than one job, but still having trouble making ends meet. She points to the high cost of living in the Traverse Area.

"A lot of the folks that visit us are working in hotels and restaurants and shops, typically making minimum wage or just a little bit above," she said. "That doesn't cut it here in Traverse City."

It seems impossible for some to get ahead. "Many of our folks working the service sector don't have a benefits package with their employment," she adds. "So if they miss work for a sick child or something, they don't get paid for those days. It doesn't take much."

Deb has also seen families who would otherwise be doing fine financially get thrown a curveball. "We

know that cars break, illnesses happen and your world is thrown into turmoil," Deb said. "It doesn't matter what your income is on paper, things can get out of control very quickly."

What They Do

Father Fred's wide wingspan sets them apart from many local charities. Potential clients come in and sit down with an intake worker who finds out what they need help with. The possibilities are seemingly endless, from the food pantry, to the home store, to financial aid.

The Foundation can work to prevent clients from being evicted, or stop their utilities from being shut off. They help people get prescriptions and doctor's appointments, or set them up with budgeting classes and job leads.

Deb makes it clear: the Father Fred Foundation doesn't do things for clients, it walks alongside them and helps them figure it out for themselves.

"Whether that means setting you up with a specialist about job placement or educational opportunities, or maybe going to NMC and talking to the counselors about opportunities there," Deb said. "It's just amazing to be able to offer people hope and a clearer vision for their future."

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The Point of Difference

While the Father Fred Foundation does so much to help the community, they're also dependent on it. Unlike many organizations, they do not accept state of federal funds.

"We're locally founded, locally focused and locally funded," Deb said. "That seems to be unique and it's something we're very proud of."

The lack of government aid gives the foundation freedom.

"When you accept government funds there are always some parameters that have to be adhered to," she said. "We want to be able to just listen to your stories and care for you to the best of our ability."

Deb says their freedom is especially helpful when it comes to their eviction diversion program.

"Government agencies can't offer assistance until the court summons has been issued, meaning a lot of additional fees," she said. "We're able to start on a seven-day notice, so the costs come down."

Feeding a Need

Many of Father Fred's clients don't qualify for food stamps (or other state assistance) because they're working. That's where the food pantry comes in.

"We're one of the largest food pantries in Northern Michigan," Deb said.

It isn't your average food pantry either. The Foundation has a chef who makes sure the food is healthy, comparing brands to get soup with the lowest sugar, and cereal with the most whole grain. You won't find many chips or fruit snacks on the shelves at the Father Fred Food Pantry.

Lending an Ear

While Father Fred's reach is wide, its focus is specific: listen, care and share. Deb says a lot of times people come in, and they just need to talk to someone.

"Sometimes clients will just meet with our chaplain or the current client assistance administrator and they will figure it out for themselves," she said. "Sometimes it's just being able to offer that listening ear that is really important."

Deb is passionate about her work because of the people, both volunteers and clients.

"They're just some of the most amazing people you would ever want to meet," she said.

Best of all, Deb knows many past clients are doing better now because they've come back to make monetary donations and pay it forward.

"We were there to help them when they really needed it," Deb said. "We see that frequently." She adds, "The stories of courage and drive are just amazing to hear."

Deb Haase lives on Old Mission Peninsula with her husband. She also has two grown children. In her (rare!) free time, she enjoys golf and hanging out with her family. Learn more about the Father Fred Foundation at www.fatherfred.org. They are located at 826 Hastings, Traverse City, and can be reached at 231.947.2055. Their hours are Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. The food pantry/clothing is open on Wednesdays until 7 p.m.



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