

kids. Now there are thousands of backpack programs throughout the country.

In the foothills, two programs are available to provide food for kids to get them through the weekend when school meals aren't available.

Known as the 285 Backpack Project and Mountain Backpacks, these programs are run by volunteers who care about kids in the community. Each week, volunteers gather to fill backpacks or bags with soups, peanut butter, milk, snacks, fruit, vegetables and more.

They work with the Mountain Resource Center, Evergreen Christian Outreach and schools to find families that can use the extra help getting by.

Here are stories of the two programs and how they help the area.

— Deb Hurley Brobst



SUE BROWN WORKS BEHIND WHITNEY GOIN and her daughter Kalina, 5, during a packing event for Evergreen's Mountain Backpacks program.

ers Shelley Harmon and Janet Anderson. After starting in one school six years ago, the program now provides weekend food to kids in eight Evergreen schools, Clear Creek Middle/High School and Georgetown Community School.

The organization recently added Emory Elementary in Lakewood.

"We wanted to start a service project to help kids in the community," Harmon said. "We also wanted to implement it so young volunteers could get involved, too."

Kids of all ages come to the church on Wednesday afternoons with their parents to sort food and pack backpacks, and there's a sign-up list on the organization's website, mountain-backpacks.org. It's important to sign up to volunteer because the space can be a little tight.

Harmon said they wanted Mountain Backpacks to give

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285 Backpack Project takes care of kids along the Corridor

On Oct. 10, four women unloaded boxes of food, set them up on a table and in assembly-line fashion, they walked around the table filling plastic grocery bags with food.

The women set up at Elk Creek Elementary near Pine, while their counterparts were at Deer Creek Elementary in Bailey — putting together bags of food for area kids needing extra help over the weekend.

The 285 Backpack Project is sponsored by Conifer Rotary with Charlotte Wytias at the helm. Wytias has been organizing the program for nearly eight years, and she has a list of about 100 people — both Rotary members and community members — who offer to help.

Wytias was tapped for the position both

WANT TO VOLUNTEER?

The 285 Backpack Project usually fills bags at about 2:15 p.m. on Thursday afternoons. For more information or to volunteer, contact Charlotte Wytias at wytiasc45@mac.com.

because she had a passion for helping kids and because she had worked with a similar program in upstate New York.

The 285 Backpack Project sends bags of food weekly during the school year to Conifer's Elk Creek and West Jefferson Elementary, West Jefferson Middle and Conifer High. It also serves Platte Canyon School District's Deer Creek Elementary and Fitzsimmons Middle, and it provides snacks

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EILEEN MCGINNITY, LEFT, SUE YETTERBERG, CHARLOTTE WYTIAS and Kay Yetterberg move down the tables lining up food items in preparation for filling bags for the 285 Backpacks Project.

STORIES BY **DEB HURLEY BROBST** | STAFF WRITER • PHOTOS BY **SARA HERTWIG** | PHOTO EDITOR

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families with young children a chance to help others.

"A lot of times when you go to volunteer, kids need to be older," Harmon said. "We really have created a program so little kids can help pack, and get a sense of community and helping."

School groups, Scouts, businesses, nonprofits and individuals help out with packing on Wednesdays.

Evergreen High School senior Jack Lindquist, a member of the school's National Honor Society, gets volunteer hours and has an opportunity to give back to the community.

Betsy Hoffman brought her sons, Carter, 8, and Sam, 6, to pack.

"I love the opportunity to be able to volunteer with my kids," Hoffman said. "They can understand why we pack the backpacks."

The food comes in large part from Food Bank of the Rockies, but churches, area businesses such as the Kittredge General Store and others help provide food.

Mountain Backpacks is sponsored by Evergreen Lutheran Church and Evergreen Rotary.

The organization will be starting a sponsorship program, so someone can donate money, for example, to feed a child for a year or to simply buy a backpack.



Photo by SARA HERTWIG | The Courier

SAM HOFFMAN, 6, GRABS TWO milk cartons that will be bagged and given to kids in need.

The program is housed in a building on the Evergreen Lutheran Church property, and thanks to Nolan Bly, 15, who is working to become an Eagle Scout, the program now has shelves and rolling bins for food and backpacks.

Nolan has been volunteering at the Mountain Backpacks for three years, and now as a sophomore at Conifer High School, he decided to help provide the tools to keep Mountain Backpacks even more organized.

Because so many backpacks are filled each week, the work is done in shifts with about 40 backpacks at a time. First, volunteers put each of the week's items into boxes on tables around the room. Then the food is emptied into backpacks

and stacked on shelves to be picked up by other volunteers and taken to the appropriate schools.

Paul Collings, an Evergreen Rotary member, was part of the group that initially helped Harmon and Anderson start the program — and he still volunteers because he says it takes a small amount of effort to make a big difference.

Harmon said the program can help families no matter how great their need, including those who might not qualify for other help.

"Community members know about us and are suggesting us to families with kids," she said. "The program is really starting to reach families who would not qualify for help."

Mountain Backpacks also stocks pantries at several schools

for any student who is hungry or who needs an extra snack during the school day. While the pantries are for all students, they also help school staff identify kids who might need help.

Evergreen Lutheran Church pastor Vera Guebert-Steward said the church congregation has a strong tradition of helping others in the community, and the Mountain Backpacks program is


no exception.

"Our congregation has many blessings," she said, "and it chooses to give them away. If some of our members have a passion for a ministry, our congregation will support it, and taking care of children is important."

Contact Deb Hurley Brobst at deb@evergreenco.com or 303-350-1041.


I NEED A HOME!

RAVEN



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are," Wytias said. "We have chosen not to do that. There is no need for us to know. We trust that the schools will get the food to kids."

She figures the program doesn't even serve a quarter of the families who could use the service.

"(The parents) are proud, and they're afraid someone is going to find out, even though we make it clear that my team has no idea who is getting the food," Wytias said. "It's all about feeding kids."

Kay Yetterberg and her mom, Sue Yetterberg, walked around the table, filling bags with peanut butter, juice, cereal, crackers, ramen noodles, milk, popcorn, pudding, and fresh apples and bananas. The bags this week were heavier than usual since there was no school on Friday.

They volunteer to help at the project first to help hungry kids, and second, because West Jefferson Elementary principal Wendy Woodland is Kay's sister and Sue's daughter.

"Both of us are retired," Kay said of herself and her mom, "and we wanted to help. We've been fortunate, and we like to give back to others."

Volunteer Eileen McGinnity has been with the program for four years. She admires the volunteers who do all of the organizing, which makes the weekly packing easy. It usually takes less than an hour from start to finish.

"I don't have any kids," McGinnity said. "I'm well fed, so kids should be, too. Schools have enough on their hands, so we can take care of this for their students."

West Jefferson Middle School principal David Schoenhals is grateful for the program.

"It's hard to educate someone who is hungry," Schoenhals said. "It's a fantastic program. (The volunteers) gather together to support our (students') need."

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for kids using the Boys and Girls Club in Bailey.

Packing usually takes place on Thursday afternoons unless there's no school on a Friday, in which case the packing happens on Wednesdays.

Most of the food comes from Food Bank of the Rockies through the Mountain Resource Center. In addition, local churches help the program obtain fresh fruit and other food to put into the bags.

Volunteers pick up cases of food and haul it to St. Laurence Episcopal Church to store it until it's needed. Then volunteers take the food to the respective schools, more volunteers fill the bags and still others take the filled bags to the schools.

School staff are charged with getting the food bags to the kids.

"There are a lot of folks involved, and there are a lot of moving pieces," Wytias said.

Each week, Wytias contacts the schools to find out how many bags of food each needs, and she never learns the names of the participants. This week, they needed to fill bags for 35 students at the Conifer schools, while the Deer Creek Elementary group filled about 50 bags.