

Food Pantry faces demand for the basics as Thanksgiving approaches



By Brock Weir

His first step into the Aurora Food Pantry was an eye-opener for Dan Ferguson.

Six years ago, he experienced a change in work, had some free time on his hands and decided to see if any community organization needed the time he could offer.

The first call he made, he says, was the Aurora Food Pantry and while he has never looked back, it has changed his perspective on what so many local families face on the road ahead.

“Since I have been looking after serving, fruit was one of the first things that shocked me – only one tin, regardless of the size of family, per month,” he says. “On the first day I volunteered, I remember how difficult it was to give away just one roll of toilet paper to a family that was still in need. That still strikes me when I serve today. These people are in need of something and this is all they get.”

Mr. Ferguson shared his perspectives with Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson and representatives from the offices of Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev and MPP Chris Ballard on Friday morning for a Food Sorting Hour at their Industrial Parkway South headquarters.

September is Hunger Action Month, and the Food Sorting Hour was a way for the Food Pantry to highlight to local lawmakers that some families, even in a community like Aurora perceived by many to be affluent, have to make do with very little or go without altogether.

The event was also an opportunity for Sandra Seepaul, the Aurora Food Pantry's new manager, to meet local politicians and make sure the Pantry is on their radar.

Throughout the morning, Seepaul led Peterson, his team, and the teams of his respective Federal and Provincial colleagues, through the process of sorting incoming donations.

They were sorted by type, use, while items with an imminent or recently passed Best Before date were set aside while, further still, expired donations were trashed.

“We want to build awareness that people do use food banks and there is a discrepancy between what incomes are, what housing costs are, and what the price of food is,” she says. “Those discrepancies are so big that our numbers have increased. About two weeks ago, we saw 50 families in during one day and [Board Chair] Allison [Stewart] says that was the highest number she has seen in the four years she has been here. Even in my drop-in program where we do meals, we see fewer people as the summer comes, but our numbers have stayed consistent.”

The surge in clients two weeks ago may have surprised Seepaul as far as the Aurora Food Pantry is concerned, but it is all part of a larger trend she has experienced across the Board.

With little more than a month under her belt as the Pantry's new manager, she comes to Aurora with a specialty in Food Security. With a background in social work, one of her first jobs was running the food bank at Toronto's Yonge Street Mission. From there, she worked in community development for the Daily Bread Food Bank and these themes have “travelled” with her throughout her

career.

Now in Aurora, she says our local Food Pantry is 'really lucky' to have the space and volunteers they currently enjoy, along with a very active Board. That is not the case with many other agencies, she says, and the experience thus far has been a good one.

While she is now focused on getting to better know Food Pantry clients, particularly those who come in on a regular basis, she is cognizant of the fact that while the Aurora community is very generous towards the Food Pantry - and recent donations during Aurora's Concerts in the Park series are a testament to this - there is always a need, particularly as holidays approach.

'Thanksgiving is coming up and one of the schools that put together Christmas packages for us containing things like shampoo, razors, toothpaste and tooth brushes, things people typically don't give to a food bank, were asking what they could do a little bit differently for Thanksgiving beyond canned items,' she says. 'Produce is something that is needed, so if you want to go out and buy us potatoes and onions and things that are really healthy, things people need and are accustomed to cooking with and using, those are fantastic contributions people can make.'

'People might not think buying a bag of apples is enough, but we can divvy it out. If everyone brought us a bag of apples, that would be fantastic. People think of baby products, cereal, rice, flour, sugar and salt to a lesser degree, but those are things we try to provide.'

Adds Ferguson: 'There are people in need everywhere and we happen to be very lucky in Aurora given the businesses and the individuals who donate to the pantry [but] there are more people in need for food than you would think in an affluent community. People are surprised all the time when I say there is a Food Pantry right here in Aurora.'