



Food Banks

LOAVES & Fishes

It's ironic that in a county as agriculturally blessed as Santa Cruz, many of its residents are unable to meet their basic food needs. What's even more confounding is that many of those hungry souls work in the agricultural sector. "There are a lot of people on the edge of poverty in this region," says Brooke Johnson, the executive director of the Watsonville-based nutrition nonprofit Loaves and Fishes. "Many of our clients work in industries with low wages, like agriculture and the service industry. They run on slim margins, so when a big expense like a medical bill comes along, one of the first things that gets cut is the food budget."

Taking its name from the biblical passage that describes Jesus' feeding a multitude of 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two fishes, the group got its start in 1989 when St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Watsonville organized a food pantry for its hungry worshippers. The organization grew quickly and in 1994, it established itself as an independent entity.

Today, Loaves and Fishes manages two distinct programs. The first is a food pantry, which provides nutritious foodstuff for families in food crisis. The

second is a hot lunch program that serves a diverse population of clients, including migrant workers, the elderly and disabled and members of the homeless population.

With an operating budget barely topping six figures and a staff of only three, Loaves and Fishes personifies Jesus' miracle of feeding the multitudes on a daily basis. Last year the group managed to serve more than 15,000 hot lunches, distribute 150,000 pounds of food from its pantry and help out thousands of people and families that would otherwise go hungry.

Disturbingly, the demand curve is expected to swing upwards in the coming months. "This year we saw about a 15 percent increase in emergency food assistance," Johnson says. "On top of that, because so many clients we serve work in agriculture and there are no wages in the rainy season, we see seasonal increases as well. Fall and winter are our busiest months."

Johnson also predicts that changes in the local economy will affect her client load. "The Birds Eye packing plant is closing this year so we are going to see an increase in demand," she laments. Johnson goes on to say that demand peaks towards the end of months when families run out of funds in advance of payday. Consulting her figures for October, Johnson says that Loaves and Fishes served 228 unduplicated households and 835 unique persons. Of that population, 400 were children.

While Loaves and Fishes sources most of its foodstuffs from the Second Harvest Food Bank, it still runs a grocery

bill averaging \$15,000 annually. The balance of this figure goes toward ingredients for the hot lunch program, which strives to provide culturally appropriate meals to its clients.

While Johnson spends many of her busy workdays running down grant money, 70 percent of the group's funding comes from community support. This outpouring of support correlates to the huge role that Loaves and Fishes plays in alleviating hunger in the community. Last year, the group responded to 28 percent of the calls that hit the Second Harvest Emergency Food Hotline. This number makes Loaves and Fishes the largest emergency food responder in the county.

When asked about her Herculean efforts, Johnson responds that the work is its own reward. "We're doing direct service and so most of our clients are so appreciative and supportive."

—Peter Koht

HOW TO GIVE

To make a difference, or to donate, contact Loaves and Fishes, 150 Second St., Watsonville, 722-4144. Food Pantry hours: 9-11:30 a.m. Monday through Friday. Lunch is served on weekdays at noon. The Community Food Hotline is (831) 662-0991. More info: 477-0800 or www.cfsc.org.