

Helping the HUNGRY

By DENISE FRANKLIN
Sentinel Staff Writer

WE ARE the world, we are the children ... So, let's start giving," the popular song pleads. Many have heeded the call, whipping out the old checkbook and feeling they've done their bit to alleviate world hunger.

A few people do more than write a check, people like Regulo Perez, a weathered, hard-working man from Watsonville; Tina Reitman and Melissa Freeman, eight grade students at Good Shepherd Catholic School; and Esther Abbott, retired professional photographer. They work directly to help fill empty stomachs.

These people put in time at places where the hungry are fed, places that will receive money from the Crop walk Saturday sponsored by Church World Services.

Perez' lined and leathery face tells of lean years. He appears older than his 65 years, but the hard times haven't spent his energy and spirit. He moves like a young man as he lifts crates of onions at the Santa Cruz Food Bank in Watsonville.

Perez', who receives a nominal salary through Senior Employment Services, started out at the Food Bank strictly as a volunteer.

"I came here because I was invited by a nephew," he says, choosing his words carefully. "The first day I came here, the foreman said that yes, we could work. We started sorting food ...

"After working, they gave me a little tag and a box of food. I was happy about that," recalls Perez, who was working as a tree pruner at the nearby Ramsay Park. "When I brought the food home, my wife said, 'Go again tomorrow.' When I returned the next day, they told me I could work only once a week on

by churches and charitable groups. The food is available at the emergency food bank on Ocean Street and at the warehouse on Main Street in Watsonville.

These bags are intended to be a one-time-only hand-out to get people through particularly hard times. In August, 5,800 people in 1,800 families received food this way.

The Food Bank also runs a brown bag program for senior citizens, using surplus food provided by the federal Department of Agriculture. In August, says Wade, 16,500 people received this surplus food.

WEARING their school uniforms of crisp white blouses and plaid skirts, 14-year-old Reitman and 13-year-old Freeman appear out of place as they move among the bedraggled diners who crowd the lunch tables at St. Francis Catholic Soup Kitchen.

The girls are among about 50 junior high Good Shepherd School students who give up their lunch hour once a week to join other volunteers serve food, clear tables and wash dishes.

The students started helping out two years ago when an eighth grade class decided it wanted to do something directly to help people during the Lenten season. When Lent ended, the students continued helping and the program grew to include sixth, seventh and eighth grades, says Principal Pat O'Brien.

"One of our goals at the school is to have the children involved in the community in a service capacity so they will know more about the world than their own little school."

Reitman and Freeman are veterans, in their second year at the soup kitchen. Both say they were embarrassed at first to serve, because they obviously had so much compared to those eating. But quickly, they add, those feelings went away.



Tina Reitman, spends her lunch hour serving at St. Francis Catholic Soup Kitchen.

Photos by Dan Coyro

Money from CROP walk will aid food programs

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That experience began a two and a half year relationship between Perez and the Food Bank. He does maintenance work, helps lift heavy crates, goes anywhere that he is needed.

The money he makes isn't important to him, he says. "Do you think a man or woman is going to be here for the wages I'm getting?" he exclaims. "I get the satisfaction of having friends here ... I like to help because I help these people and they help me."

Once a week, workers are offered a box of food as a way to say thanks, says program manager Jane Wade.

Volunteer Karen Mendoza of Watsonville summed the sentiments of her fellow workers Wednesday as they removed onions from a large bin into small crates. "I can personally say that this program is one of the greatest things in the world for people like us who don't have the money to buy food."

The Food Bank, Wade explains, collects from the food industry and redistributes the food to 200 non-profit groups in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties.

With the revenue sharing funds it gets from local government, the Food Bank hands out emergency food bags to people referred to them

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"It is something we can do to help out because we are more fortunate," says Freeman. "There are a lot of people in the county who need help, food and shelter. In all countries, they need that and we just want to do our part here."

"We stress to the students, by citing gospel stories, that you don't give just because you have a lot. Your reasons for giving should be to be helpful to others. I question them: 'Could you do this if you didn't have a lot? Could you still share?'" adds O'Brien.

Some 200-300 people are fed daily, Mondays through Fridays, at the soup kitchen that was organized by Peter Carota. Diners receive soup, bread, salad and dessert obtained through direct donations of food and through monetary contributions, like the proceeds from the Crop walk.

Soup kitchen volunteers also make a weekly trip to the Beach Flats area to give out food and clothing to 50 families.

WHILE the Food Bank and the soup kitchen buzz with activity and people, it is quiet where 74-year-old Esther Abbott works to help the hungry.

A table and the counter top of a small room in the Salvation Army building on Laurel Street are covered with brown grocery bags filled

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One way to help the hungry is by taking an active role, like participating in the CROP walk Saturday sponsored by the Community Hunger Appeal of Church World Services.

This is the second year the walk will take place here, with participants walking five, 10 or 15 miles and collecting money from sponsors. Other walks are scheduled throughout the state this month, all centering on World Food Day Wednesday.

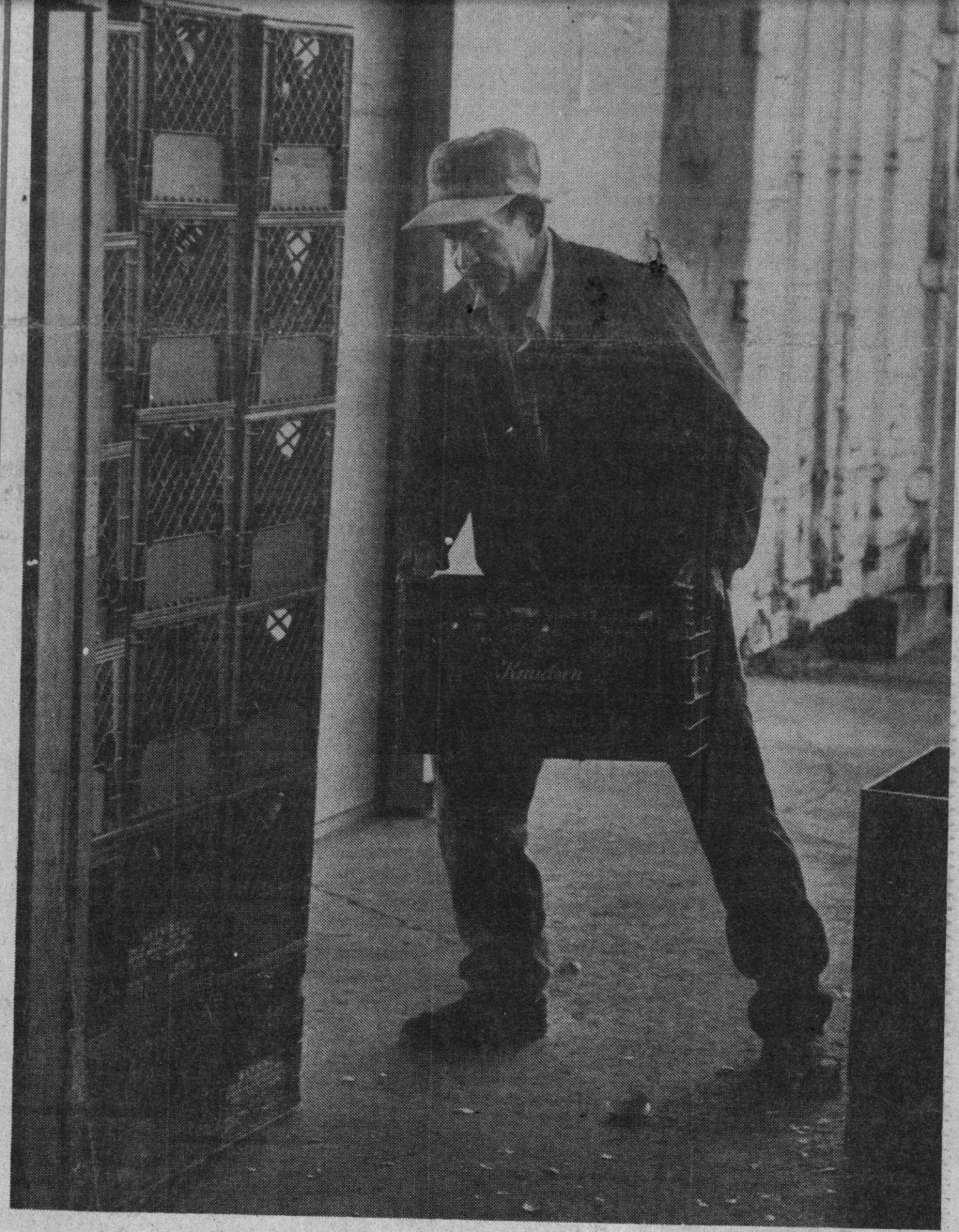
A quarter of the proceeds from the Santa Cruz walk will be distributed locally to the St. Francis Soup Kitchen, which provides hot lunches to the hungry; the Santa Cruz Food Bank, which distributes food to non-profit groups and gives out emergency food bags and surplus food from the federal government; and Santa Cruz Salvation Army Corps, which hands out emergency food bags to families and bag lunches to transients. Other proceeds will be distributed to food programs throughout the world by Church World Services.

Last year, approximately \$5,000 was raised by 50 walkers and 25 percent went to local charitable groups. This year, organizers are hoping for a larger crowd.

Walker registration will be at 8:30 a.m. Saturday at Holy Cross Catholic Church, 126 High St. A rally is set for 9 a.m. and the walkers will move out 15 minutes later.

Pledges will be turned in during a gathering and potluck dinner at 6 p.m. Oct. 28 at the St. Francis Catholic Soup Kitchen, 205 Mora St.

For more information, call the Rev. Don Haugland at 475-1071 or Chris Dugan at 426-8365.



Regulo Perez helps at the food bank.