

Retired University of Maryland food services manager runs parish's food pantry in Prince Frederick

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Volunteer Larry Donnelly, left, a retired food services manager from the University of Maryland, chairs the Interfaith Food Pantry at St. John Vianney Parish in Prince Frederick. In the photo above, he visits with a client, at center, while one of the program's 64 other volunteers, at right, brings out a bag of food. The program now serves about 115 clients each week.

On any given Wednesday afternoon, the small frame building beside St. John Vianney Church in Prince Frederick becomes one of the largest church-run food pantries in Calvert County, serving 100-115 clients of all ages and backgrounds. The leader of the band of volunteers there is Larry Donnelly, 74, who retired after a 35-year-career of managing food service for students at the University of Maryland.

A gregarious man with a gift for gab and with the food service organizational skill hewn from his years doing that work in the Army and then at Maryland's flagship university, Donnelly now has a different clientele, but the same goal.

"It's just like a family atmosphere. We want to make clients happy... We want them to feel at home," said Donnelly, who smiled and noted that he and his fellow volunteers, mostly parishioners, draw the same salary for their work at St. John Vianney's Interfaith Food Pantry - 0 dollars. His crew of 14 volunteers on this Wednesday have food bags and a variety of food staples placed out on long tables behind the building, and they greet clients by name, joking with them like friends, which they are.

Donnelly was recently his parish's recipient of the Archdiocese of Washington's Manifesting the Kingdom Award, given by Cardinal Wuerl to more than 200 local Catholics for their outstanding service to the community. He was honored, but he later emphasized his respect for the 65

volunteers who serve at the pantry during the week - helping him pick up food purchased at a steep discount from the Maryland Food Bank, and from donations boxes at local churches and even the community barbershop, and restocking shelves and packing carefully organized bags of food for different sized families. "All I'm doing is steering the ship," said Donnelly. His volunteers, he added, are "the best there is."

"We're giving food away, but what we're really giving away is hope," said Gordon Norwood, the food pantry's office manager who is retired from the Maryland Park Police. In addition to helping see that individuals and families don't go home hungry at night, he and other volunteers provide them with resources to help them get back on their feet again.

Father Peter Daly, the pastor of St. John Vianney, praised Donnelly as a man who "lives his life in service to the Church, through the parish and the Knights of Columbus."

Donnelly also runs the snack bar for basketball and volleyball games at the parish's Family Life Center, and runs St. John Vianney's First Sunday Breakfast, where about 300 people enjoy a country breakfast and socialize before and after Masses. "I go through seven pots of coffee at 80 cups a pot," Donnelly said, again smiling.

A Vietnam veteran and a Boston native, he worked in dining halls during his 10 years in the Army - "everything from cooking to brining in food, to ordering food, serving and cleaning," he explained. Then he got the opportunity to work for the University of Maryland's Dining Services, and he moved his wife Elaine and their four kids across the country, and he worked at the university for nearly four decades. "My main concern when I was there - when the students came in the door, we took care of the students. That was my number one priority," he said.

One highlight of Donnelly's years at the University of Maryland was feeding the football team when Coach Ralph "The Fridge" Friedgen led the Terrapins. The appreciative coach presented Donnelly with ACC championship and Peach Bowl rings that the team and staff earned during those years.

At Maryland, Donnelly tried to provide the students with a varied menu, just as he does now with the food pantry clients. The pantry is stocked with frozen deer meat cut by a local butcher, from meat provided by hunters, along with fine cuts of meat from the Maryland Food Bank, bread and bakery items from local supermarkets, and sandwiches from Wawa.

Before serving the food each Wednesday afternoon, Donnelly joins the volunteers and some clients in praying together. "We all say the Our Father, to ask God to be with us," he said.

And volunteering beside him at the food pantry, First Sunday Breakfasts and parish snack bar is his wife of 30 years, Elaine. Taking a brief break as she sorted out food in the building's basement, Elaine Donnelly smiled and said, "I'm always his sidekick forever. Where he goes, I go!"

A hand-written note from a family of eight is displayed on the office wall of the food pantry, near where volunteers keep computerized track of their clients and their food needs, which

guides the volunteers downstairs packing bags. The note reads: "May God bless all of you at the food pantry. From the top, bottom and middle of our hearts. Thank you for blessing us, we never went hungry during those trying times."

That note, said Donnelly, explains why the volunteers run the food pantry for their neighbors. When asked if Jesus's words in Matthew 25:35 - "For I was hungry and you gave me food..." - resonated with him, the senior citizen said, "That's in all of our minds. We believe we're really doing God's work."

And not surprisingly, Donnelly is a fan of Pope Francis, who has called for a Church that is poor and for the poor. "He's telling us what should be done, and we're already doing it" here, Donnelly said, adding, "Maybe someday he can come and help us serve bags of food, or bring it to the cars."