

Feeding the freezer

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Laura Jean Whitcomb*



Today's recipe is macaroni and beef pronto. "It's an ancient Mueller's recipe," says Janet Paulsen of Wilmot. And although four ladies are cooking up enough food to feed 100 or more people, they are not intimidated by the task at hand. The group, members of the Kearsarge Community Presbyterian Church in New London, has been preparing meals for the "Feed the Freezer" project since January 2009.

"It started with the kitchen," says Dave Barden, mission committee chair. Indeed, the church has an amazing professional kitchen; it was added as part of a 2004 renovation. The original thought was to use the underused location as a soup kitchen, but "after a few meetings it was decided that the most practical way to provide food to needy individuals and families was to distribute frozen casseroles through the Newport Food Pantry."

Church members donate \$10 each month to purchase ingredients, and many items — such as about-to-expire meat and vegetables are donated by Hannaford supermarket in New



From left to right: Kris Cary, Jane Hollinger, Janet Paulsen and Dot Wicksman make meals for the Newport Food Pantry.

London. Today there are four volunteers, each one with a different job. Kris Cary of Springfield is chopping onions, green peppers and red peppers; Dot Wicksman of Sutton is dicing zucchini. Jane Hollinger of New London is washing out empty tin cans so they can be recycled; Buffy McPhee of Newbury will pick them up later in the week. Paulsen is frying vegetables on the four-burner gas stove.

Cary using a large knife to chop vegetables like a pro. "You can go on the road with that show, Kris," says Barden.

Cary laughs. "I knew watching all those cooking shows would pay off."

Small groups of willing cooks have been meeting every other week to create meals out of whatever donated food they have. Extra-large cans of chili, provided by the food pantry, are used as the base of a casserole. Super-sized boxes of elbow macaroni find their way into the pronto

casserole or a macaroni and cheese recipe. "We like to keep things simple, and vary the recipe according to what we have for ingredients," says Paulsen.

The group estimates that they'll make 45 casseroles today. Since each casserole serves two (three, if there's a small child in the home), that's 90 to 135 people that won't go hungry. "I cook for one at home. Here I'm cooking for 40," says Wicksman. But she doesn't mind at all. "The need is great right now. There are a lot of families who need help."

About 60 church members — from middle school students to 80-year-old retirees — volunteer in the kitchen. "If I'm short a cook, all I have to do is ask," says Paulsen, one of two head cooks, "and I get twice as many people as I need."

The food preparation process is also a nice social experience, building on the fellowship of the church



congregation. “We enjoy each other’s company,” says Wicksman. “We feel like we’ve done something together. It’s the basis of friendship.”

Paulsen adds precooked ground hamburger to the sautéing vegetables. The mixture bubbles, and Cary and Wicksman quickly add can after can of tomato sauce.

“Needs more worchestire sauce,” says Paulsen. “I’m not sure why I get the job of tasting?” Soon everyone is trying some pronto in a tiny dish. When they’ve decided the flavoring is right, Cary adds the thermometer to the stock pot. The casserole has to reach 180 degrees before packaging, then cool to a temperature of 140 degrees before the containers go in the freezer. The volunteer operation takes their work seriously — everyone wears hair nets, aprons and gloves, and the kitchen is inspected by the state of New Hampshire.

Hollinger is writing casserole ingredients, under the date, on the cardboard tops of the aluminum containers

provided by the Newport Food Kitchen. Cary ladles noodles into each container, Wicksman sprinkles cheddar cheese on top, and Cary and Hollinger add the tops and turn down the edges to seal the casseroles. Soon 29 containers are ready to go into the professional freezer. “I’m glad we’re making use of it,” says Paulsen. Barden will pick up the frozen casseroles the next day and deliver them to the Newport Food Pantry, where families eagerly await a homemade meal.

“They do cartwheels over them. People are asking for them, and ask if they can come back when we have them,” says Rich Chappell, coordinator of the Newport Food Pantry. “There’s a good variety, they are good quality — it’s been a blessing.” The pantry provides food to 290 families a month (close to 900 people). The two-serving casserole is perfect for seniors, and bigger families take home two containers.

After two hours, the ladies are halfway through — another pot of sauce and another pot of boiling noodles are

waiting. “It’s heartwarming to feel like we’ve done something,” says Wicksman. “I’m grateful that I have enough food, and I’m glad that someone else can get food if they need it.” They make 26 more casseroles, bringing their total donations (to date) to 1,381 casseroles. That’s about 3,000 bellies fed.

WHAT: Feed the Freezer project

WHERE: Kearsarge Community Presbyterian Church, 82 King Hill Road, New London

WHEN: Every other Tuesday from 1 to 3 p.m.

WHY: Food pantries aren’t all cans and boxes

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Donations can be sent to Kearsarge Community Presbyterian Church, Feed the Freezer, 82 King Hill Road, New London NH 03257. The project would welcome a gift of several four- or five-gallon pots.

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