

Providing Food and Dignity in Dunsford

The stairs to the basement of Dunsford United Church are steep, but there's a warm welcome waiting at the bottom from the volunteers of the Dunsford Food Bank. As clients make their way down, they are greeted with a cheerful — and genuine — “Hi! How are you doing?”

They receive a pound of hamburger, frozen or canned vegetables, bread, margarine, soup, pasta, cleaning supplies and other staple items from the well-organized food bank. The half-dozen volunteers each have their own area to look after, offering clients choices where possible to fill up the reusable bags the recipients unfold when they arrive. At least one lost everything in her refrigerator and freezer during a recent power outage.

It's clear that these compassionate folks don't judge the people using the food bank, but rather, see them as equals. “Everybody's treated respectfully,” says co-ordinator Nancy Draper. “Our clients are really a great bunch of people.”

Anna Thurston, who founded the food bank with her husband Jack and now runs it alongside Draper, knows that hunger isn't just a big city problem, or even one that's limited to towns like Lindsay. As a nurse doing home visits, she saw too many homes where the cupboards were almost empty. A Dunsford couple, Judy and Roger Degenais, had been running a small food bank out of their basement, but when they moved away, the Thurstons presented the need to their United Church, which agreed to take the project on. That was in 1998, making Dunsford one of the first food banks in what is now Kawartha Lakes.

Volunteers worked with the church, service clubs and local residents to build their service. In 2002, Kawartha Lakes Food Source was formed, providing a much-needed allotment of food every month. The Food Source collects and distributes food and other household items to local food banks; each member agency is responsible for picking up its monthly share. In Dunsford, extra volunteers receive the heavy boxes full of food, carry them down those stairs and sort them onto shelves. The Food Source was a welcome change, says Thurston. “We knew we were going to have trouble if we didn't have a bigger umbrella group in this area.”

Like all member agencies of Kawartha Lakes Food Source that provide food to the public, clients of the Dunsford Food Bank must fill out an intake form to determine their household income and expenses. If there is less than a set amount left over in a month, they qualify for help; many clients are in the red after covering just the basic household expenses before purchasing food. “You can't change costs like rent and heat, so people cut back on food,” says Thurston.

If they're having trouble in other areas, volunteers refer people to agencies that can provide support. Clients' circumstances are reviewed regularly; they frequently stop coming when their incomes increase.

On the second and fourth Thursday of each month, from 10 a.m. until noon, they can come here for a few days' supply of basic items. Recently, Dunsford has been serving as many as 14 families a month, although that number has dropped back to more normal levels recently. Thurston thinks higher gas prices have pushed some people on low incomes to move to town to avoid driving.

Others are moving back in with family members to save money. Clients may be on disability, elderly people trying to stretch a pension cheque, or families who've been hit by job loss or poor health. Some only use the food bank a few times a year, when they're going through an especially rough patch.

Draper and Thurston clearly care about all the people who pass through the food bank's doors. They tell the story of one woman who wasn't well, largely because of poor nutrition. Once she started coming to the Dunsford Food Bank, her husband said she felt better because she was eating better. "She's just a changed woman," says Draper. "She smiles all the time now."

Nancy Payne is past president of Kawartha Lakes Food Source. If you're interested in donating to KLFS or becoming a volunteer, call 324-0707.