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WHITE PONY EXPRESS DELIVERS DAILY DONATIONS WITH LOVE *By Jody Morgan*

White Pony Express (WPE) continues to grow exponentially as the innovative non-profit works to eliminate waste by preventing waste. Three hundred and sixty-four days a year, ten refrigerated WPE trucks collect fresh, nutritious food that donors, including many local supermarkets, would otherwise have to discard. Sorted by volunteers according to client requests, the food is delivered the same day to agencies throughout Contra Costa County. Always ready to respond to the needs of others, WPE staff and volunteers live by their motto: "All of us taking care of all of us." The WPE General Store provides new



Deena White repacks eggs. Retailers cannot repack and sell a carton if one egg breaks. Photo courtesy of WPE.

and gently used clothing, toys, and children's books using mobile boutiques to bring free goods to individuals and families needing them most. Complicating the delivery process and escalating the demand for essential services, the COVID-19 pandemic finds WPE soliciting emergency funding to add 30



Sorting food according to client preferences is a favorite WPE volunteer activity. Photo courtesy of WPE.

agencies on the waiting list to the 70 county agencies already being served. The COVID Care Campaign Challenge (see page 8 for more information) matches up to \$300,000 in **donations received by June 30th**.

Launched in 2013 as an all-volunteer organization, WPE quickly evolved into a volunteer powered program. Steve Spraitzar, WPE Public Relations, explains, "As we matured, we found we needed certain important administrative and operational jobs to be performed on a regular basis to keep our organization running smoothly."

WPE's reliability formed the basis for successful partnerships with businesses

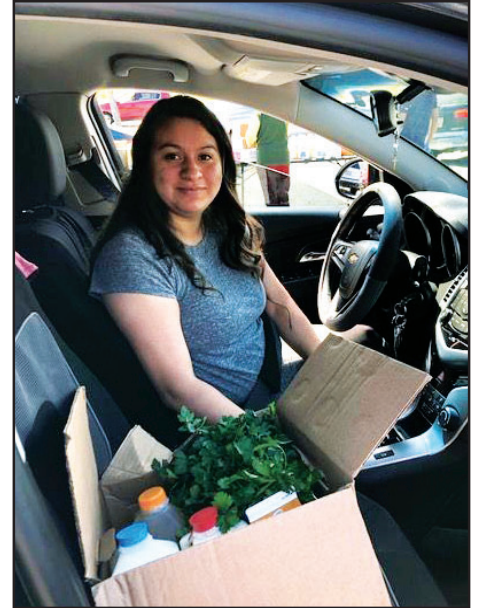
donating food. Spraitzar notes: "We moved to hiring part-time and full-time drivers to make sure that pick-ups and deliveries would be completed." Today, 20 staff members are empowered by 400 dedicated volunteers. As of June 10, 2020, WPE has delivered 11,842,630 pounds of rescued food.

Erica Brooks, Chief Growth Officer, recalls, "I remember when there were four of us, and things really started scaling -- we looked at each other from the couches in one of our living rooms during a late-night meeting and all simultaneously recognized what was happening. We had built trust within the community, and our recipients had come to depend on our deliveries to run their programs. We realized that to honor what we had built and our commitments, we needed to become a viable, sustainable, organization."

Forged early on, the connection with farmers' markets generates joy all around. Farmers sometimes drive for hours to bring produce to Saturday and Sunday markets, only to have to toss anything unsold at the end of the weekend. One farmer said it was like "watching his family's money swirl down the drain." Erica recalls, "When we told him that whatever they couldn't sell, we could take and give to other families who needed it, his face lit up. It has always touched me how those living so close to poverty, those who have so little, often give so much. It feels real to them."

WPE was still operating on a shoestring budget when the General Store opened in 2014. The guiding WPE principle dictates that every item offered must be something a staff member or volunteer would proudly give to his or her own family. Brooks describes the first customer who came to find clothing appropriate for a job interview. He arrived in a hoodie and left in a color-coordinated ensemble complete with tie. He described the experience as "The best day of my life!" He landed the job and kept it.

Growth came in spurts as funding from angel donors made expansion possible. In 2015, after reading my article in *Alamo Today* (now *Alamo Today & Danville Today News*). Alamo resident David Gemmer asked to tour the WPE facility and wrote a check on the spot for \$5,000. President of the Board of the Gemmer Family Foundation and a major WPE supporter, Dave recounts his



Happy recipients of school pantry goods pick up food in drive-though events during the pandemic. Photo courtesy of WPE.

experience: "A light bulb went on. This seems to be exactly what the Gemmer Foundation is looking for." All of the food picked up by WPE is surplus, nutritious, and free to WPE. Thereafter, it is immediately delivered free of charge to shelters, community centers, and faith-based organizations. Dave says, "Each dollar donated was a home run!" He explains WPE significantly multiplies the impact of each dollar by caring enough to match rescued products with specific needs, such as finding a cake for a child's birthday.



Mindy Bush cheers a load of fresh rescued food ready for delivery. Photo courtesy of WPE.

School pantries, currently established at 11 county schools, were added following a test run with a mobile pantry. Having food available daily rather than only on specific delivery days makes a huge difference for many vulnerable families. Although the COVID-19 pandemic currently limits access to food pantries to drive-through opportunities, the ultimate goal is creating pantries in every qualifying Contra Costa school.

The Cold Weather Project, founded in 2016, focuses on helping people coping with homelessness during the winter. The 2019 objective projected delivering 12,000 cold weather supplies and 500 emergency backpacks to comfort more than 3,000 people lacking shelter. Backpacks are stuffed with useful items like mylar blankets, tarps, rain suits, umbrellas, hats, and gloves. Working with Contra Costa agencies, faith-based organizations, and schools, WPE fills requests for sleeping bags, winter coats, and boots.

Outreach goes beyond agency connections when a need is spotted. In the December 2019 WPE newsletter, Steve Harrell, Director of the WPE General Store, wrote that he was at a large shopping mall, a short walk from WPE's Pleasant Hill headquarters, when he saw a man sitting on a bench. A brief conversation revealed the man didn't do drugs or drink alcohol, and he was barely able to rent a room and really needed a warm coat. "I went straight back to WPE, got a coat in his size (XL) and an emergency backpack from the Cold Weather Project, and I delivered both to him promptly with a huge smile."



Cliff Strand epitomizes the WPE's successful circle of giving now delivering donations with love to shelters where he once resided. Photo courtesy of WPE. Strand's comments. "Peter Brooks, one of the pioneers [of White Pony Express], had no business being under that bridge outside of Oakland, but what he did was deliver me food

with love and dignity and hope." Now Strand delivers with understanding and compassion to shelters where he once resided.

Strand's experience illustrates one of WPE's three core principles. The interaction - giving with love, fostering hope, and respecting the dignity of each individual - is as important as the transaction of delivering essential supplies. Food pantries offer the opportunity to select items. Mobile boutiques allow children, whose home life may be falling apart, to choose a toy or book. Erica explains that their world becomes much bigger the moment individuals are given the ability to choose.

Harnessing the power of volunteerism is the second principle. Whatever your talent or time limitations, WPE welcomes your contribution. Most popular is sorting food for distribution. Maybe you love ironing and have only half an hour a week to help with goods for the General Store or can offer support in technology.

The circle of giving is the primary principle that defines the WPE model. A donor's surplus food and clothing is picked up by WPE and distributed to those most in need. Having healthy food and an attractive wardrobe enables recipients to move from the margins of society into the mainstream where they in turn extend a helping hand to others.

Eve Birge, recently welcomed as WPE Executive Director, writes about the organization's strengths for the April 2020 newsletter: "We listen carefully to our communities to learn about changing needs, and then we mobilize hearts and hands to address them. At WPE, we don't see red tape -- we see a need, and we respond with love by giving what is needed."

Although eager to aid non-profits seeking to replicate the WPE model, WPE extends services outside Contra Costa County only in response to extreme emergency. WPE founder, Dr. Carol Weyland Conner received the prestigious 2019 AARP California Andrus Award in recognition of WPE's immediate support of survivors of the 2018 Butte County Camp Fire. From November 2018 through mid-August 2019, WPE sent vans stocked with fresh food and clothing along with small cash donations to deal with daily necessities.

Donate, volunteer, and find more information at www.whiteponyexpress.org. The COVID-19 Care Challenge \$300,000 contribution match is generously offered through June 30th by the Gemmer Family Foundation, Luis Gerardo del Valle Torres, Heart's Path Charitable Foundation, Coit Family Foundation, and Brad and Lynn Smith.

