

KENOSHA NEWS

SHARE the love

Volunteers keep food distribution system running for 25 years

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In 1985, Mary Modder was a single parent on welfare, trying to make ends meet when she learned of a way to save money on her food budget. Her neighbor, who had six children, introduced her to the SHARE program, a not-for-profit, food-buying organization that offers food at reduced costs through a volunteer-run, community-based distribution system.

“You could get \$30 worth of food for \$12,” Modder said. “I signed up, and my son, who was 4 or 5 years old at the time, and I would help pass food out. I did it for about five years and it was a big help.”

Modder said that the money she saved through the SHARE program helped enable her to return to school and eventually get her teaching certificate.

Twenty-five years later, Modder, of Somers, is coordinator of the SHARE distribution site at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Kenosha. It’s a volunteer position she has held for six years.

Promotes volunteerism

SHARE, an acronym for Self Help and Resource Exchange, has sites in Wisconsin, Upper Michigan and northern Illinois. These and other SHARE-affiliated programs throughout the country all have a mission of providing access to good, nutritious food at reduced cost through a self-help system, which fosters the dignity and self-worth of each person and acts from a commitment to serve the common good.

The SHARE program has no income guidelines, membership fees, or eligibility requirements. Shoppers order items each month at a savings of 30 to 50 percent compared with supermarket food. The program accepts all forms of payment, including Quest cards (food stamps).

“About 20 percent pay with their Quest cards,” said Deacon Ron Lesjak of Kenosha’s St. Mary Catholic Church, a SHARE site since the program’s inception here. “They’re using it and it’s been a godsend for them because it really is a saving on their food budget.”

The program is driven by the efforts of volunteers, and all participants are asked — but not required — to give two hours of their time each month to some form of community service. Many put their volunteer time back into the SHARE program, working at the distribution sites on the monthly delivery days.

This volunteer time is an essential part of the resource exchange that makes SHARE different from a social service-type of organization, Lesjak explained.

“This program is so good because it’s not free food,” said Lesjak, of Kenosha. “It makes (participants) feel a part of something.”

Lesjak has been the Kenosha County coordinator for SHARE for the entire 25 years the program has been available here. He and other SHARE volunteers celebrated the local organization’s 25th anniversary at a dinner at the St. Mary site on Aug. 26.

With the help of six local companies — SuperValu Transport, Birchwood Transport, Nelson Transfer Inc., Otto Nelson Moving and Storage, Bane-Nelson Inc. and KIX Inc. — Lesjak has coordinated the monthly trucking of food throughout the year from the SHARE distribution warehouse in Butler, Wis., to Kenosha.

Organized in 1985

The local program initially was organized through the Kenosha Interfaith Network in late August 1985, and the first delivery came on a snowy day just before Thanksgiving of that year.

Distribution sites have changed over the years, but in the beginning those at St. Mary Catholic Church were joined in the effort by the Rev. Olen Arrington at Second Baptist Church, the Rev. Ken Gelhaus at Immanuel United Methodist Church, and the Rev. Jerry Hessel at the Latin American Center.

The first citywide order was for about 1,200 units and included area charitable organizations ordering food for holiday baskets they were preparing.

“At Immanuel, there were people standing around the whole block, waiting to get into that little church basement and the truck was three hours late,” Lesjak said.

Today about 200 Kenosha County families purchase food through SHARE each month. Over the years, the program has become a well-oiled machine, but the challenges organizers and workers faced over the past 25 years aren't forgotten.

“Once we had such a big snowstorm nobody was able to get out to pick up their stuff until the next day,” Modder said. “We packed all the frozen stuff in snow banks outside of the church until people could come and get it the next day.”

Distribution sites

Distribution day for the SHARE program is usually the third Saturday of the month. There are four distribution sites in Kenosha County:

- St. Mary Catholic Church, 7307 40th Ave., Kenosha
- Second Baptist Church, 3925 32nd Ave., Kenosha
- St. John's Lutheran Church, 3833 Eighth Ave., Kenosha
- Westosha Community Center, 19200 93rd St., Bristol

For more information on the SHARE program, call toll free 800-548-2124 or call Ron Lesjak at 262-694-9143 or visit the SHARE website at sharewi.org to order online.

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