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Jefferson Awards: Her leadership at food pantry provides hope for many

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

By Bob Hoover, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The destructive effect of Pittsburgh's long decline in population can be seen in stark relief in its West End-Elliott neighborhood.

A lively place of shops, taverns, churches and well-kept homes in the 1950s, the neighborhood, just minutes from the Golden Triangle, is now a landscape of empty lots, sagging porches, demolished schools and boarded-up stores.

Yet, hope and help have shared this landscape for years, thanks to such organizations and their volunteers as the Southwest Food Pantry and its manager, Esther Hoegle.

Mrs. Hoegle's 24 years of service at the food pantry has earned her a 2006 Jefferson Award for Public Service.

She is one of seven recipients selected this year and will be honored at an awards dinner at Carnegie Music Hall on Jan. 25, where she will receive a \$1,000 donation from Dewey & Kaye for her charitable agency.

"I'm just as enthusiastic today at the food pantry as I was 24 years ago," Mrs. Hoegle of Green Tree said. "We're still helping the people there, and that's a wonderful thing.

"Still," she added, "it's not the kind of business you want to see continue."



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

Jefferson Award winner Esther Hoegle has been a volunteer at the Southwest Food Pantry for 24 years.

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The food pantry operates in the Guardian Angel Roman Catholic Church, 1000 Logue St., every Tuesday from 10 to 11 a.m.

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It serves between 150 to 200 families a month, Mrs. Hoegle said. "And half of them are children under 18."

When she began volunteering at the pantry in 1984 as the city's heavy-industry economy was in its final days, Mrs. Hoegle served fewer people and saw her role there as temporary.

"You have to wonder why, when the economy seems so good, the people keep coming in," she said. "Even the people who have jobs can't make enough to pay the bills and feed their families these days."

Along with making up bags of groceries, Mrs. Hoegle refers the pantry's users to government employment services.

"Sometimes it works out for them," she said, "and the more people I can get working, the happier I am."

Pat Bennett of Bethel Park nominated Mrs. Hoegle for the Jefferson Award because "Esther deserves this recognition, especially to take on all this responsibility at her age."

That's a subject Mrs. Hoegle adamantly refuses to discuss, however. "Winning this award has nothing to do with my age. I'm not going to go around broadcasting it because there are more important things to talk about."

Mrs. Bennett would say only that her friend is "between 70 and 100."

The two met when Mrs. Bennett visited the church, then St. James, in 1991 as part of Mercy Hospital's Parish/Congregation Visiting Nurse Program. That service sends registered nurses into neighborhoods served by churches to offer medical tests and counseling.

"Esther suggested I visit the pantry every week because 'That's where the people are,' " Mrs. Bennett said. "Her suggestion has worked beautifully."

The nurse advises the pantry on distributing infant formula and baby food to mothers, and special foods such as low-salt, low-fat items to people with dietary restrictions.

Much of Mrs. Hoegle's work is administrative, including attending meetings of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, the pantry's primary supplier, but Mrs. Bennett said she continues to devote time to her clients' individual needs.

"Esther knows that even if people do have a job, it's tough to make ends meet with a family. She's gone out of her way to make sure they get a substantial amount of help."

Mrs. Hoegle also works to supplement the pantry's limited offerings of fresh food by watching for supermarket sales, where the agency's limited cash can bolster

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supplies, Mrs. Bennett said.

The food pantry also receives donations from the Southwest Interfaith Ministry, representing the churches in that area of the city.

"We're only open from 10 to 11 in the morning, but everyone who comes in by 11 is served," Mrs. Bennett says. "Esther stays until they are taken care of."

Mrs. Hoegle grew up in Crafton, moving to Green Tree in the late 1950s, where she became a member of St. Margaret Roman Catholic Church.

When the church put out a call for food pantry volunteers, Mrs. Hoegle answered.

"The food pantry takes up a lot more time than you would imagine," she said, "but when you see how much it helps, then I don't mind spending the time. It's a challenge, and maybe that's why I like it so much."

(Bob Hoover can be reached at bhoover@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1634.)

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