

The News-Reporter

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Washington, Georgia

July 24, 2008

God's Marketplace celebrates one year of helping

By **WHITNEY RICHARDS** intern reporter

God's Marketplace Food Pantry is celebrating its one-year anniversary this month. Statistics show that over the past year, the Food Pantry has fed 1,057 families and 2,438 individuals.

The Food Pantry is a part of God's Marketplace, Inc (GMI). It was opened in August of 2007 and made possible by a gift of the lease for the property from Margaret and James Jones. Many volunteers came forward to help paint the building, move shelving, and get the place ready for business. The Food Pantry is managed by Rich Seibert with assistants Buddy Lindsey and Joan Drinkard.

With help from over 20 other volunteers and businesses, it is possible for the Food Pantry to be open three Tuesdays each month.

The original idea of a local food pantry began with Gertrude Tyler in the early 1980s. The First United Methodist Church used to host the food pantry in the basement of the church with outreach leader Tina Blakey in charge of the small operation. At the time, an average of 8-10 individuals were fed each week. Rev. Gail Seibert and Blakey knew they wanted to expand but had trouble finding a suitable location.

With a desire to give something back to the community, The Joneses helped make God's Marketplace a reality. Since the opening of the Food Pantry at its Robert Toombs location, almost 100 individuals are fed every week.

"The clientele is growing. We see some of the same people, but lately there are new names and faces. It's exciting to be there and nice to be in a place where we're serving a real need," said manager Rich Seibert.

"It seems impossible that a little over two years ago, Rev. Seibert asked the question, 'Can we wipe out poverty in Wilkes County?'" GMI Director David Toburen said. "With her encouragement, the God's Marketplace Food Pantry came into being. With the help of other pastors with like vision, the Food Pantry has grown."

Toburen pointed out that the monthly average for the past year is 81 families and 188 individuals. Over the last three months, with food costs and other things going up, he said, the average has been 91 families and 188 individuals.

Assistant manager Lindsey explained, "Last year, Wilkes County schools collected and donated over 2,100 canned goods. We still have some of it on the shelves. We plan to have another food drive in early November. We have been very fortunate to be in a community that supports a cause like this and I see us continuing to grow."

The Food Pantry operates strictly on donations and money raised from the neighboring Thrift Store. "We continue to look for more workers and are appreciative of any donations made," said Seibert. "We are grateful to all that have donated to the Food Pantry."

Local grocery stores, S&J Lawn Maintenance, the pre-release center, schools, churches, restaurants, and individuals have made the GMI Food Pantry a success in the past year with volunteer help and various donations.

Toburen invites everyone to stop by and volunteer to help. "We'd love to put you down for a Tuesday."

After a year of local support and encouragement, Toburen added, "Again, thank you Washington, Georgia, for your continued generosity."

To become a volunteer or donate to God's Marketplace, contact the First United Methodist Church at 706-678-7116.