

Community High School District 94

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PRESS RELEASE **CHS District 94 Holiday Giving**

In the spirit of giving, students and staff at Community High School in West Chicago came together to help St. Mary's Food Pantry feed families this holiday season, as well as make sure every child had a toy under their tree this Christmas.

"The WeGo Beyond Committee is made up of staff who go beyond the classroom to get the school involved in the community," said Assistant Principal for Student Services Gail Aronoff. "We sat down, and we asked 'What does the community need?' We knew that there is a food crisis because people don't have jobs and can't afford food, so we then began to figure out ways to help St. Mary's food pantry."

Although there were many charitable events already active at the high school, water jugs were placed in the Cafeteria and signs were hung. People were asked to donate whatever change they received to the food pantry. They were also asked to bring in canned good, toilet paper, and other basic necessities. Isabel Pasillas, of Quest Food Service (the high school's food service distributor) stated that Quest matched all money (\$217) raised in the water jugs..

The food drive surprised the Pantry's manager, Ken Walker, who has volunteered at the Pantry for almost seven years. According to Walker, the Pantry was able to feed 837 families in November alone, distributing nearly 18,000 pounds of food. "[Even with] every single inch of this space filled, it will be gone in two weeks, and then we start over again," said Walker.

Working the Pantry has become Walker's passion in life. He is motivated by the fact that he is helping many people. "The hardest thing for our families to do is walk in the door. My motivation is when someone walks in that door, they will walk out better than how they walked in," said Walker.

With everything set for food and toiletry donations, Aronoff still felt more could be done to help Walker and the families he takes care of and asked, "What else can we do to help?" Mr. Walker stated he likes to include Christmas gifts for the families at the pantry, so the staff and students collected toys including Beanie Babies and Matchbox cars. "We've collected hundred and hundreds of toys. It's just great!" said Aronoff.

“Because jobs [for students] are scarce, students in the BTI [jobs program] can’t find jobs,” said Aronoff. “We have kids doing volunteer work at the Pantry to earn credit for this class. We also had three to five special needs students volunteering as well.”

With everything in full swing, donations were coming in from multiple locations. This simple plan to donate some food had grown into something much bigger. “This whole food drive turned into a huge effort. Our goal was just to support the Food Pantry, but it became so much more because of everyone’s generosity,” said Aronoff. “The spirit of giving was reflected at our school and it was wonderful to be able to add to the already successful annual food drive that Skills USA runs.”

On December 17, Aronoff, along with representatives from Student Council, SkillsUSA, Key Club, Art Club, the Smith Family Foundation, as well as English teachers Shannon Atkian-Sanchez and Richard Kost, helped organize the food drive. They met at the St. Mary’s Food Pantry to help with the delivery to the Pantry.

The event began with Club representatives talking about what their Club had done in the spirit of giving. Juniors Nici Burlingame and Robbie Windisch (Student Council) donated the money collected from the Turkey Suit Competitions in which students contributed money for particular teacher(s) to wear a turkey costume during an entire school day. Senior Nadia Yang announced that Art Club had donated \$250 out of their budget, without doing any fundraisers. Junior Key Club member Brenna MacDonald said that the Club created and hung all of the signs around the school to raise awareness for the event. SkillsUSA members and seniors Emily Tulipano, Angela Gentile, and Kevin Szul collected cans for the club’s annual food drive.

In addition to all of the school’s donations, a private foundation (the Smith Family Foundation) donated money, scarves and gloves that they received after hosting a party where each guest was asked to bring such items.

In total, the St. Mary’s Food Pantry received \$2,025, and, since every dollar donated is worth five times more at the Illinois food bank, in total the Pantry received \$10,125.

“We didn’t do this to compete with other great community service ventures like WeGo2Africa. It’s just another way to give. It’s just an important part of being a good person,” said Aronoff of the event.

The pantry is open Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. Donations are always welcomed, and greatly appreciated.

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