

Beilue: Food, shelter needs rising

New project benefits area organizations

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Jon Mark Beilue

Column

She did not look like the typical face seen in the Faith City Ministries chapel. Executive Director Jena Taylor had not seen her before as she sat in the worship service just prior to the free meal the outreach center serves.

Empty Bowl

The Empty Bowl Project is scheduled from noon until 3 p.m. Saturday at the Amarillo Civic Center's Grand Plaza. The project is a national movement to increase awareness of hunger to raise money for those organizations that feed those in need. Cost is \$20 per person. Chefs from the city will provide food. Agencies that will benefit include Faith City Ministries, Another Chance House, Wesley Community Center, Children's Camps for the Underprivileged and interfaith Campaign for the Homeless. For more information, call 806-373-6402.

"She was beautiful," Taylor said, "but she was scared out of her mind. She had lost her job and had never been homeless before. Now she comes every day to eat with us. It breaks my heart."

She is just one of many in the city and the Texas Panhandle who struggle to eat on a daily basis, many for different reasons. Amarillo, along with demographically similar cities, is not a hunger-ravaged Third World country like Sudan or Ethiopia. After all, this is the United States - land of the free, and home of the brave and Big Mac.

But it's naive to believe hunger doesn't exist here. Hunger is an issue if it happens to someone else. Hunger is a problem if it happens to you. And it's becoming a bigger problem locally in recent years.

"There are so many people struggling right now," Taylor said. "Many families find themselves trying to make ends meet and just not really having the funds to do that, and eating regularly often takes a backseat to things like shelter."

To that end, The Empty Bowl project, a first for the city, is scheduled from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Civic Center's Grand Plaza. Faith City, along with four other nonprofit agencies who target hunger, are part of a grass-roots movement to alleviate the hunger problem in the area.

"More than anything, I hope the community can come together and join hands and focus on dealing with this issue in our own backyard," Taylor said.

Skeptics can say most of the hunger problem is from drug and alcohol abusers, and certainly, there are those. There are some who are mentally ill, and some who know how to work the system. But it's more than those. Numbers don't lie.

Last year, Faith City served 119,000 meals and expects an 11 percent increase this year. They've seen a significant rise in families - two parents and children eating - not just the predominantly white male of the past.

"Their response is: I have a home, but they can't pay the rent and buy food," said Taylor. "So they come and eat with us. Many are in HUD housing and still can't make ends meet."

There's a huge risk in Faith City's sack lunch program, where those who work grab a sack lunch in the morning on the way to work. A total of 1,700 were prepared in May.

Hunger knows no age and no geographic area. Young children, particularly in north Amarillo, are often the innocent victims of neglect and poverty. City Church in the summer hits the neighborhoods to serve meals to adolescents. Wednesday, they served 1,900 meals. They expect to hit 3,000 by Tuesday. Last summer, the most the church served was 2,200. Meals on Wheels delivers about 200 daily to homebound elderly.

But what is almost stunning is what the High Plains Food Bank has seen. With a fairly new refrigerated 18-wheeler, the Food Bank makes four to five trips a week to among the 29 counties it serves. They take 20,000 to 25,000 pounds of food on each trip to various agencies.

"It has really picked up in the last three years," said Zack Wilson, communications director for the Food Bank. "There's a huge need out there we're meeting."

Last year, the Food Bank's volume was 4.7 million pounds of food. Conservatively, Wilson estimates it will be 6 million this year, with 5 million of that leaving Potter and Randall counties. That's telling. Wilson was in Silverton recently for a food giveaway, and the line circled around a city block.

Bryan Scot, a small-engine mechanic, and wife Brandy came to Amarillo from Austin last week with their two children, one of whom has autism. They said they left because their daughter was continually ill from mold in their Austin home.

They couldn't stay there, and the landlord refused to fix the problem, claiming the mold wasn't toxic. They came to Amarillo hoping for some temporary assistance from two of her sisters. It didn't happen.

"We wouldn't survive if we didn't have the Lighthouse (a Faith City family shelter) and our kids not being able to eat healthy," she said. "We hope to get out on our own soon, to get a house again and a job. And to let our kids have a banana when they want one."

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