

Oklahoma City

# downtown

Monthly



FEEDING A NEED  
*Where Hunger Ends*

ONCE UPON A TIME...  
*Be a Character at the Fairy Tale Ball*

SunDay  
Drivers

*Get Into Gear for Spring!*

DONALD W. REYNOLDS  
DISTRIBUTION CENTER

REGION

# FEEDING A NEED

Photos by **David Cobb**

Children living in poverty have to do without a lot of things – food should not be one of them. In 2003, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma received a call from the principal at a local elementary school, who reported that a young boy had fainted while standing in the cafeteria lunch line. It was discovered that the child had eaten only one hot dog, with no bun, since school lunch on Friday. With so little food at home, he simply was not able to make it to lunch on Monday.

The Regional Food Bank investigated and discovered that this was not an isolated incident – schools throughout Oklahoma were witnessing children in need of food on weekends. Children were showing their desperation by asking friends and teachers for food, scraping remnants from their cafeteria trays, hoarding food from Friday's lunch and even taking food from cafeteria trash cans. As a result, the Food 4 Kids program was launched to reach out and help these children.





Food 4 Kids is an emergency food assistance program. Children who are identified by school personnel as chronically hungry receive a backpack filled with nonperishable, kid-friendly nourishment each Friday during the school year. They take the nondescript backpack home, eat the food over the weekend and return their empty backpack to the school the following Monday morning.

The backpacks are loaded with sustenance – thanks in large part to the dedication of volunteers – at the Regional Food Bank’s headquarters, located since 2000 in the Donald W. Reynolds Distribution Center at 3355 S. Purdue. An expansion of the site in 2009 added additional warehouse, freezer, dock and volunteer space, increasing the total size of the current facility to 150,000 square feet.

In its first year, Food 4 Kids served 180 children in five OKC elementary schools. In the seven years since then, the program has grown tremendously in response to the overwhelming need it meets. Today, Food 4 Kids operates in 285 schools, serving over 7,600 children in 41 counties in central

and western Oklahoma. That’s a tremendous achievement that has literally changed thousands of lives, but unfortunately it’s far from completely fulfilling its purpose of obviating juvenile hunger – it is estimated that more than 13,500 children in the Regional Food Bank’s 53-county service area need the program.

With increased unemployment and decreased wages, tight budgets are being stretched even further by families who struggle to put food on the table. A Food 4 Kids coordinator in McClain County shared a story about a child who was recently referred to the program. “I called the little girl to my office to discuss how the program would work. As I discussed the details of the program, she was smiling from ear to ear. I then went through one of the bags of food with her, so she would have an idea of the types of food items that the bags contain. With almost every item I pulled out of the bag, she would clap and almost yell, ‘I love cereal! I love peanut butter!’ Her excitement was priceless. Thank you for providing food for this child!”



A school counselor in Mustang wrote to the Regional Food Bank, "We have a family in which both parents work minimum wage jobs and work the afternoon/evening shifts; therefore, the older siblings care for the younger siblings. Of course, finances are tight and the family provides the best they can for their large family. When the Food 4 Kids program was offered to the children, I wish you could have seen their faces. They could not believe that they would be getting these snacks and were so elated that their younger siblings would also receive the food bags. These children were very appreciative. The counselors here would like to thank the Food 4 Kids donors for their continued support of this program."

As rewarding as it is to see the recipients' emotional responses, the program's impact is farther reaching than immediate gratification. A program evaluation conducted in spring 2009 demonstrated positive effects not only on children's hunger levels and interactions with food, but also on their social and academic lives. Teachers report improvements in attendance, attention, grades and self-esteem, and a reduction in behavioral problems.

## SUCCULENT SUPPORT



The most mouthwatering way to support the Regional Food Bank's Food 4 Kids program is by warming up your palate and making reservations to attend the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual Chefs' Feast, set for 7-10pm on March 4 at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

Chefs' Feast is a much-anticipated food and wine tasting event where the public has the opportunity to sample some of the finest cuisine Oklahoma's premier chefs have to offer, while enjoying great music, a wine pull and entertaining prize giveaways.

The event helps raise awareness of the issue of childhood hunger in Oklahoma, and since all proceeds benefit the Regional Food Bank's Food 4 Kids backpack program, it's a sensational opportunity to contribute to children who need help the most. Last year, Chefs' Feast raised more than \$93,000 in net proceeds - enough to support 372 children in Food 4 Kids.

Guests at the Western-themed shindig, presented by Chesapeake Energy Corporation, will enjoy more than 75 delicious dishes made by representatives of area eateries including Big Truck Tacos, Cafe 7, Café Evoke Catering, Casady, Cheever's Café, Chef's Requested Foods, the Faculty House at the OU Health Sciences Center, Gopuram Taste of India, INTEGRIS Southwest, McNealey's Catering, Nonna's Euro-American Ristorante & Bar, Platt College, The Ranch Steakhouse, Red Prime Steak, Rococo Restaurant and Fine Wine, Seasons Catering, the Sheraton Hotel, Sodexo, The Coach House, The Mantel Wine Bar & Bistro, The Metro Wine Bar & Bistro and the Will Rogers Theatre. Coordinating Chefs are Don Thiery and Trattoria Il Centro's Christine Dowd.

Along with excellent food and wine, celebrants can purchase chances to win a Marco Bicego gold necklace courtesy of B.C. Clark, dinner for two to some of the area's finest restaurants, two nights at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Catoosa, two tickets to John Mayer's concert on March 5 at the Ford Center, an original gown and fitting session courtesy of Johnathan Kayne or a trip for two to the wild, wild West courtesy of Southwest Airlines.

Chefs' Feast tickets are available now - call Angie Gaines at the Regional Food Bank at 604.7109.



Among coordinators and teachers who oversaw children participating in the Food 4 Kids program:

- + 96.6% saw fewer complaints about hunger.
- + 93.7% witnessed fewer effects of hunger when children arrived at school on Monday mornings.
- + 84.1% observed fewer requests for food.
- + 87.3% said they had seen children pay better attention in class once they joined the program.
- + 85.9% observed an improvement in children's academic performance.
- + 77.5% witnessed an improvement in children's school attendance.

Work continues to raise the funds necessary to provide food for every chronically hungry elementary school student in central and western Oklahoma. A \$200 donation provides a backpack filled with nutritious food every weekend for an entire school year for one child. The Regional Food Bank is even working to expand its summer feeding program to help take the added burden off families who are already struggling to make ends meet when school dismisses for the summer.

A school principal summed up the program's effects by saying, "Learning begins when hunger ends." To learn more about the Regional Food Bank and the Food 4 Kids program, including how you can help, visit [www.regionalfoodbank.org](http://www.regionalfoodbank.org) or call 972.1111. ■