

HEROES

Fighting Hunger

Millions of Americans worry about going to bed hungry each night. Meet five inspirational people who are working to change that—their passion and generosity may spark you to make a difference too.

BY PAULA DERROW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID TSAY

THE POWER PAIR

Alexandra “Finn” McFarland, 18, and Anna Ramsey, 18 • Woodstock, VT

Anyone who assumes teenage girls would rather spend their time taking selfies than helping others hasn’t met Alexandra “Finn” McFarland and Anna Ramsey. In 2011, as ninth graders, Finn and Anna volunteered to deliver produce to Woodstock’s local food pantry through the nonprofit Change the World Kids. While there, they noticed the pantry didn’t have fresh fruits and vegetables after October because there was no suitable storage. “Everyone should have access to healthy food year-round,” says Anna.

“One man told me he hadn’t had carrots in a year,” says Finn (right), with Anna in the root cellar they helped build.

The girls researched ways to store produce during colder months, and by tenth grade hit on the idea of constructing a root cellar like the ones used before the advent of electricity: a structure built into the earth that keeps food fresh for months. “But getting the project approved by the town—it seemed daunting,” Anna admits. Still, the duo formed a committee with other Change the World Kids, did research into

“Most people think that teenagers won’t follow through, so we learned what to do to be taken seriously.”

how cellars were constructed and what permits they’d need to build, then found a site behind the town’s elementary school. In 2012—with a volunteer contractor, a structural engineer and an excavator—the determined crew began building. The root cellar officially opened on October 6, 2013. The community donated produce throughout October, and some local farmers set aside plots specifically for the food bank or gave the cellar their leftovers, which included apples, onions and other vegetables. “We ended up with enough to sustain the food bank all winter!” Finn says.

Now freshmen in college (the two split a \$5,000 scholarship through the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes), Finn and Anna still brainstorm with the kids who run the cellar about ways to expand. “I can’t wait to visit during vacations and see it stocked with vegetables,” says Anna. “That’s a huge feeling of accomplishment.”

To find out more about the root cellar project, go to changetheworldkids.org.

OPPOSITE PAGE: HAIR & MAKEUP BY LINDSEY WILLIAMS FOR KATE RYAN INC. THIS PAGE: HAIR & MAKEUP BY VIVIAN INFANTINO FOR ZENOBIA AGENCY.



Pam runs her nonprofit from home.

MOM WITH A MISSION

Pam Koner, 63 • Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

When Pam Koner read an article in 2002 about Pembroke, IL, a deeply impoverished community where families lived in shacks with dirt floors or rusted trailers, “it was like being tapped on the shoulder,” says the mother of two girls. Her family had never done much volunteering, but “it struck me that we had so much and those families so little.” So Pam picked up the phone and called a pastor in Pembroke. “I said, ‘Tell me what you need.’”

What Pembroke needed, it turns out, was food. By the end of the month, Pembroke’s residents, like many families across the country, were going hungry. Some 90% of food stamp recipients have redeemed their \$133 average food allotment by the third week of the month, according to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Food pantries also tend to be empty by then. So Pam reached out to other parents, friends

and neighbors, and said, “If each one of us ‘adopted’ a family in Pembroke and sent them food near the end of every month, we could tide them over.” Seventeen families sent out 17 boxes of food that month. “And we tucked notes among the cans and jars,” says Pam. “The families wrote back and we connected—when someone needs that box, you can’t let them down.”

Pam asked FedEx to cover shipping, and when the company agreed, her basement turned into a clearinghouse for food, books and clothes headed to Pembroke. In a year, the project became the nonprofit Family-to-Family, which now has 2,000 monthly donors and serves 23 communities. The most amazing moment was when Pam met her “adopted” family. “The mother and I ran into each other’s arms,” Pam recalls. “We all cried. It was a powerful experience.”

To sign up to feed a family, go to family-to-family.org.

THE BIG-HEARTED FARMER

Gene Gumfory, 75 • Denton, TX

Gene Gumfory is a man who believes in signs. Back in 2009, a friend mentioned that he wished he had a place to garden. A few days later, Gene read a Bible passage referring to God planting a garden, “and it struck me—*Hey, if I could find just one acre, I could share it with others.*” Gene, who had grown produce with his father as a boy, put the word out that he was looking for land and soon found a man willing to donate 14½ acres to Gene’s church. The Shiloh

Field Community Garden was born. Today, the garden produces more than 24,000 pounds of food each year and helps hundreds of hungry people each week with deliveries to The Salvation Army, local food banks, churches and a daycare center. “When the kids hear that Farmer Gene is coming, they all cheer,” he says with a laugh.

“We teach gardening, too,” says Gene, who shows kids of all ages and walks of life how to plant and grow vegetables. “I love being able to do this for others.”

SET UP A
FOOD DRIVE
IN YOUR
HOMETOWN

Go to womansday.com/hunger for a starter kit of information.

“I felt called to do this. And now, to my knowledge, Shiloh Field is one of the largest community gardens in the country.”



THE KINDNESS
PROJECT
FIGHTS HUNGER
Woman'sDay

Stretch your donated dollar

In addition to giving canned goods to food banks, consider a monetary donation to help the 49 million Americans who worry about getting enough to eat. Feeding America, a hunger relief charity, needs funds to provide meals to 60,000 soup kitchens and pantries. When you give \$10 (which only buys a few cans at the store), you'll help supply 100 meals to hungry families. Find out more at feedingamerica.org.

THE FOOD BANK PHENOM

Gail Womack-Murray, 59 • New Orleans

You wouldn't think that a homeowner who worked as a budget analyst for the federal government would find herself applying for food stamps. But that's what Gail Womack-Murray did in 1987 when, after a divorce, she had to support her family on a single income. “I had three boys under age 6. My mortgage, car payment and childcare took up most of my salary. When I added up the numbers, there was no money left for food. I was one of the working poor.”

So Gail filled out food stamp forms. But, like 26% of Americans struggling to buy food, she earned too much to qualify. “I was denied, and it broke my heart. I thought it was my last resort.”

Gail left the agency in tears, and met a kind woman on the street who directed her to a nearby food pantry. “They not only prepared me a nice box of food, but they gave me a \$10 voucher for meat at the market. I left with my integrity.”

Food banks are critical in helping the hungry, even among those who qualify for food stamps. According to the nonprofit Feeding America, 58% of food stamp recipients visit food banks at least six months of the year.

Gail eventually got back on her feet, but she never forgot the people who helped her, and by 1998, she was able to do some helping of her own. With the support of Second Harvest Food Bank, a nonprofit that donates food to

feeding programs, she opened a pantry at her New Orleans church. By 2005, they were feeding 150 households a month, and had grown into their own nonprofit, Love in Action Outreach.

Then, in August of that year, Hurricane Katrina destroyed the church and pantry. For a year and a half, Gail and volunteers gave out food boxes from a street corner, feeding 400 households a month. “People began lining up at 6 A.M.,” she recalls. “I wanted to do better.” So she set up yard sales and an ad hoc thrift store to raise funds to lease a storefront.

Now retired, Gail devotes herself full time to Love in Action Outreach (which today feeds more than 2,100 families). “The work makes me grateful,” she says. “If I'm having a bad day, I'm always aware that there is someone in a more difficult place, and it's my job to help.”

To donate, go to loveinactionoutreach.org.

THIS PAGE: HAIR & MAKEUP BY ALLISON LACOUR FOR ZENOBIA AGENCY.