

Enough to fill the pantry

Fill the Dome raises \$96,000, 97 tons of food to help fight hunger

BY KELLY SMITH / THE FORUM

The faces behind the Fill the Dome food drive just might be as extraordinary as the number of cans collected.

There are students such as Perham (Minn.) High School senior Elena Arvig who spent countless hours collecting donations that resulted Monday in raising \$96,266 and 97 tons of food.

There are volunteers and organizers such as Linda Clark of Fargo's Emergency Food Pantry who hand out food with a smile to those in need all year.

And then there are people such as Tamara Wagner who are simply grateful.

"To know there are people out there that care, it helps," the 32-year-old Moorhead student said at the food pantry. "It makes you feel less low. It's really stressful not knowing where you'll go for food."

For the 21,000 others who show up at the food pantry, they have a little less to worry about thanks to hundreds of students behind this year's Fill the Dome project. From Kindred, N.D., to Perham, students from 58 schools topped their goal of raising \$75,000 and 75 tons of food, outdoing themselves for the third year.

They raised enough to serve all 21,000 people until March – up 4,000 people from 2007, Clark said.

"The food we get from the dome ... every bit goes," she said.

The Great Plains Food Bank distributes food to local pantries and shelters. Of money raised, 30 percent goes to local groups and 70 percent goes to a mobile food pantry to help in rural western North Dakota.

"You're making a difference for so many people," said North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven. "We talk about North Dakota being a community ... you epitomized that sense of community with this Fill the Dome effort. We could not be more proud of you."

It was a sentiment echoed by former Gov. Ed Schafer, city officials and community leaders on Monday.

Students' third goal this year fell short. They aimed to get 7,500 signatures showing the area's awareness of hunger, but received 2,500. They'll keep it up online at www.fillthedome.org until Thursday in an effort to get 5,000 signatures.

"We knew that food drives alone do not end hunger; they only temporarily postpone it," said West Fargo High School senior Levi Bachmeier. "Only through awareness, hunger could ... truly be resolved."

Until it is, hunger will continue to be a reality for those lining up at food pantries. For them, these students' efforts mean everything.

"It's really helpful," said Jamey Haataja, a 24-year-old unemployed Moorhead mother of two. "I don't come here every month, but if I do, I know where it's at."

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Readers can reach Forum reporter

Kelly Smith at (701) 241-5515