

BWE GIVES BACK

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MICAH TOWERY

PROVIDES MEALS FOR HUNDREDS AT LOCAL SOUP KITCHEN

Living in the US, where food is seemingly abundant and plentiful, many Americans might find it surprising just how prevalent hunger is in the country and in their neighborhoods.

According to statistics presented by the United States Department of Agriculture, more than 11% of the US population, or more than 40 million Americans, live in food-insecure households. The USDA defines food insecurity as households that at some point during the year are uncertain of acquiring or are unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food.



Micah Towery, (wearing white hat), and his wife Jillian, (wearing apron), are part of a regular group that volunteers at the St. Augustine parish soup kitchen in South Bend, Indiana. Their kitchen distributes free meals to visitors three days each week.

“ *It's about connecting the dots between: The food is there, there's food to be eaten, and there are people who need it. So there needs to be a way for that food to find the people who need it. And this is the main way that happens for a lot of people.* ”



Micah and the other Volunteers prepare hundreds of sandwiches and gallons of soup each day to distribute to hungry visitors.

There are many government programs and other aid institutions that work to reduce these numbers and ensure that people are getting fed. One very important effort to combat hunger is the work done at soup kitchens, like the one at St. Augustine Parish in South Bend, Indiana, where Bellwether Enterprise USDA Processor Micah Towery volunteers several times each month.

Micah began volunteering at the St. Augustine soup kitchen when he and his wife Jillian moved to the city in 2013. The soup kitchen there serves food every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and for the first few years, Micah volunteered every Friday. Now Micah and his wife Jillian switch off every Friday, ensuring that at least one of them is there to lend a helping hand every week.

As a volunteer, Micah makes sandwiches and assists with assembling and distributing bags to the visitors. His routine involves arriving at around 8 a.m. to begin preparing meals to distribute when the open the doors at 11:30. His first task is making between 150-200 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Once he's finished, and the soup makers have made the soup, the group of volunteers begin getting the bags together and ready to hand out. The contents of the bags depend on what is on hand and what has been donated for that day. They will always include a couple of PB&Js and four 16-ounce cups of the day's soup. Micah said other common items often include fruit, vegetables, bread, canned meats, and doughnuts.

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At his location, which is one of several soup kitchens in South Bend, Micah said the number of visitors on any given Friday is very unpredictable, ranging anywhere from 50 to 100 people.

Among the most surprising things that Micah said he noticed early on during his volunteering, and something many Americans may not realize, is the vast diversity in individuals who visit and receive meals from the kitchen.

“The people you see coming in aren’t always the people you picture when you think of a soup kitchen,” he said. “I think that it’s easy to picture that it’s just going to be your traditional image of a homeless person. You might think of the pictures from the Great Depression, people lining up outside, and it’s actually not like that very much at all.”

He estimated that about 50 percent of people who visit the kitchen do so regularly with the kitchen being a part of the everyday routine. But the other 50 percent do not regularly rely on the services and are people who may have simply had a bad month for one reason or another and need help getting through the tough financial period.

“I guess people are more financially precarious than we imagine,” Micah said. “And at any given moment, it doesn’t take a whole lot for people to suddenly not have enough to buy food for the week. A lot more people are living close to the edge than I think we picture.”

Understanding that fact is part of the message Micah said he hopes the community can realize. There are more people needing the services than most realize, and without soup kitchens across the country, even more individuals would go hungry.

And that is what has Micah coming back to volunteer week after week, year after year.

“It’s about connecting the dots between: The food is there, there’s food to be eaten, and there are people who need it,” Micah said. “So there needs to be a way for that food to find the people who need it. And this is the main way that happens for a lot of people.

“It’s a really valuable thing. It fulfills something really important because you’re helping people often get over the hump, which are unpredictable by their nature. It’s a pretty important safety net for a lot of people.”

Micah said he doesn’t have a direct call to action for the soup kitchen he volunteers at the St. Augustine parish or any other specific soup kitchen. But food distribution centers like St. Augustine everywhere could always use more helping hands. And with the knowledge of the many different people living in many different situations who rely on food pantries and soup kitchens, Micah encourages people to volunteer their time and donate when possible, to ensure no one goes hungry.

“It’s always nice to have new people coming in,” he said. “The more you have, the less it relies on any one person always being there. So more people getting involved would be great.”

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There are tens of thousands of food pantries and soup kitchens across the country, and most are always looking for more volunteers and further assistance. There are many online resources individuals interested in volunteering in their neighborhoods can visit to find local food pantries, including foodpantries.org or feedingamerica.org.



Each visitor of the soup kitchen receives a bag with four 16-ounce containers of the day’s soup. Much like the other contents of the distributed bags, the style of soup varies each day based on what donated ingredients are available.