

Easter fun to help feed the hungry

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The 15th annual Easter Extravaganza to benefit Project Hunger is fast approaching.

The evidence is plain to see through a storefront window at the Conestoga Mall, where volunteers have been preparing Easter baskets filled with various kinds of merchandise that will be up for bid as part of a silent auction starting Saturday morning.

All proceeds will go to benefit Project Hunger.



Project Hunger President Doug Winder (left) and board member Sue Moran wrap a basket for the organization's annual Easter Basket Extravaganza. This is the 15th year for the fundraiser. (Independent/Scott Kingsley)

"This is one of our two big fundraisers," said Jay Wren, chairman of the Project Hunger event. "The other is our Harvest Festival."

Wren said that organizers have a goal of having 400 baskets to raise \$20,000 for Project Hunger. He said the money is split three ways, with the majority of the proceeds aiding the Community Food Pantry at the Salvation Army in Grand Island, a portion going to the Food for Thought program, and a portion also going to the Gap program.

"All the money stays local," he said.

Project Hunger works with local grocery stores to get good buys on food each month, Wren said. When the organization finds a good price on various foods, it communicates with the food pantry to learn how much of each kind of food is needed. It then buys the food that's needed.

Wren said the Food for Thought program is run by Verna Haberman, coordinator for the Grand Island Public Schools Outreach Center. In that position, Haberman works with homeless students who attend the Grand Island Public Schools.

The school district's Food for Thought program was developed after Haberman discovered that some Grand Island students are not able to get proper meals over the weekend, when there is no school breakfast or school hot lunch program.

She makes sure that each Friday afternoon those students receive backpacks that are filled with food for

the weekend.

Wren said Project Hunger provides money for Haberman to buy food to put in the Food for Thought backpacks. It also issues vouchers for milk and eggs that parents of students can redeem at local grocery stores.

Wren said the remainder of the Easter Extravaganza proceeds fund the Gap program through the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. He said the Gap reference is a reminder of the old saying about there sometimes being “too much month left at the end of the paycheck.”

“People think food programs only benefit the homeless,” Wren said.

But he noted that often beneficiaries are the working poor: people who are working hard at jobs and trying the best they can to raise their families, but who often find themselves short of money needed for life’s necessities.

The Gap program provides food vouchers that the Department of Health and Human Services then distributes to such families, Wren said. Project Hunger has accounts established at local grocery stores that allow people to redeem those food vouchers.

Wren said people and organizations involved with The Gathering Table also prepare baskets filled with items they have donated. He said those proceeds also go to Project Hunger.

However, The Gathering Table is staffed by volunteers from local churches and other organizations that buy food that is then prepared and served on Sunday evenings at the Salvation Army dining room at Third and Eddy, Wren said.

He noted that the Salvation Army serves meals Mondays through Fridays, so The Gathering Table helps fill in with a Sunday evening meal.

As for the Easter Extravaganza, a wide variety of individuals, businesses, schools, organizations, youth organizations and others donate merchandise for baskets. Most baskets carry donor names, although some carry labels simply marked “anonymous.”

Wren said the extravaganza includes a friendly competition for best mall basket, best girls’ basket, best boys’ basket, best men’s basket, best women’s basket and so on.

He said tables and baskets will be moved from the storefront to the mall walkways between about 9 and 10 a.m. Saturday so the silent auction can begin. The silent auction will end at 3 p.m. People will be able to write down their bid, plus their name, address and telephone number.

Wren said people do not have to be present to win. But in case they do submit the winning bid, people must make sure they have a telephone number to they can be contacted at the conclusion of the silent auction. Each bid must go up by a minimum of \$1 from the previous bid.

Items in the auction include golf bags; a couple of golf putters; a barbecue kit comprised of cleaner, lighter, brush and temperature fork; a tool kit for the do-it-yourselfer; a croquet set; and a framed photograph to decorate the home.

There are also baskets designed for specific demographic groups. For “tweens” – most likely girls – there is a “New Moon” basket with DVD, two posters, a board game, bookmark and magnets. For boys, but also possibly girls, there is a “basket” with a skateboard, helmet, and elbow and knee pads.

In a nod to the varied interests of modern girls, one basket has a Snow White doll, Cinderella doll, lip gloss, nail polish, necklace, hair ties and a softball and a bat.

