LOCAL WOMAN LENDS A HELPING HAND TO FOOD BANK

Volunteer currently uses services of food pantries

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. — At first glance, Vanessa Gibson is a laughing, smiling 50-year-old single mother of six who is not ashamed of where she has been and where she is going in her life.

Gibson, who has relied on food pantries for nearly two decades, is giving back to the hands and hearts who have helped support her and her family by volunteering at the Huntington Area Food Bank (HAFB).

Her story begins in 1974 after she moved to Huntington, W.Va., from Compton, Calif., to live with her grandmother after the death of her mother. Gibson’s father passed away in 1979, and she struggled to come to terms with their deaths.

“I lost them both,” Gibson said. “My mother died on Christmas, so for a long time, I didn’t celebrate Christmas until I had my first baby. She wanted to see Santa Claus and a Christmas tree, so I got back into the swing of things.

“Because of that experience, I was not the person I should have been at the time, so I had to go get help from the food pantry. I’ve been going to the food pantry since my son was two. He’s 20 now. It’s sad to say I’m not where I should be by now, but that’s the way life is. I’m not giving up on myself. I’m going to continue and progress in life where I want to be.”

Before Gibson knew of food pantries, she went to local churches, relatives and friends for assistance. Even to this day, she still receives assistance from local food pantries and churches. Pantries can provide food, household items, clothing and other basic needs. By volunteering her time at the HAFB, Gibson said she feels she is giving back.

“I’ve been volunteering for a year. I’ve given back to the people who help me,” Gibson said. “As a volunteer, I meet people face to face, but not just the people who help me, but their directors. When agencies pick up their pantry orders, I get to make one-on-one contact with the people who I didn’t know were helping me back in the day. I say ‘thank you’ to them for being there for me when I get the chance.

“I just love this place. I really do.”

Gibson said she starts her day at 9 a.m. and sometimes walks from her home on 30th Street to volunteer at the HAFB. To her, this isn’t just another job, but a job she is eager to wake up to four days a week.

Some of her day-to-day duties include calling agencies in the 17 counties the HAFB serves in the Tri-State to inform them of delivery dates and what they will be receiving. Gibson said this is what she enjoys most about her volunteer work.

“When I call to tell them, ‘We have some allocations for you, and it’s free,’ it just makes their day. They say, ‘Thank you so much. Our cupboards are empty,’” she said. “It makes me happy to know I call them at the right time for something they are supposed to get anyway. It’s a good feeling.”

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Gibson also answers inquiries about telephone and Internet orders for agencies, enters data and file information and packs food boxes for delivery. She said she is interested in learning more about the HAFB’s operations so she can help when she is needed.

“Vanessa has been a tremendous help to the food bank,” said Brooke Ash, assistant director of the HAFB. “There are many ways to give back to your community — not just donating food or money but by donating your time, talents or services.”

Volunteers at the HAFB, like Gibson, play an important role in daily activities, such as packaging boxes of food for delivery in the warehouse.

“Volunteers don’t realize how many people they’re helping just by volunteering,” Gibson said. “Everyone who volunteers is doing something for people they don’t know, and they thank you for it.”

While Gibson has faced many hardships, she said she has decided to not dwell on the issues but instead directly solve them. This is a mantra she hopes to pass on to her children, ages 3 to 33.

“They’re at the age to where they have a chance. I don’t want them to be too proud to go without when people want to help you if you need it,” Gibson said.

“If it had not been for the food pantry, they may have not had some of the clothes that had when they were young. I want them to appreciate them for helping their mother help them. I want them to grow up to help the pantry, not to grow up with the mindset to go to the pantry.”

Helping Hungry Hearts, a student-run public relations agency from the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Communications at Marshall University, is also helping Tri-State residents in need. The agency will host the Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk at 9 a.m. April 10 at Pullman Square in downtown Huntington. Proceeds will help the HAFB combat the hunger problem in West Virginia, Ohio and Kentucky.

For more information about Helping Hungry Hearts or to register for the Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk, please visit www.marshall.edu/helpinghungryhearts or e-mail the agency at helpinghungryhearts@marshall.edu. Also contact co-director Whitney Parsley at 304-389-0390. To learn more about the HAFB, please contact Ash at 304-523-6029 or brooke@hafb.org.

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The Huntington Area Food Bank (HAFB) is a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1983 and based in Huntington, W.Va. The HAFB is affiliated with Feeding America, the country’s largest hunger-relief organization. The HAFB serves more than 250 agencies in 17 counties in West Virginia, southeastern Ohio and northeastern Kentucky. The HAFB’s main mission is to curb the hunger problem in the Tri-State. The HAFB relies on grants, community donations and the United Way to provide food to its agencies. Agencies include food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters, senior citizen programs, youth programs and residential programs. For more information, please visit www.hafb.org.