Fall 2026

the Harvester

What it Means to Give a Life-Changing Gift

The first week Samantha and Dee arrived in Hornell, their children were staying with family while they worked to piece together something every family needs — a place to call home.

"We had nothing," Samantha said.

No furniture. No food in the cupboards. Just determination to rebuild.

What they found next was a community that met them with open arms. Through Catholic Charities and the Turning Point program, Samantha and Dee began to steady their footing. Support came in many forms — help navigating insurance, access to food, connections to therapy for PTSD, and even guidance through legal challenges. Each piece, small on its own, came together to create something life-changing: stability.

> **"To some, it might feel like a small donation, but to us, it's a lifeline."** - Dee

Today, that stability looks like a home filled with the rhythms of family life. Dee manages a store in Hornell. Samantha, who lives with

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Twenty Years of Fueling Bright Futures

As backpacks are zipped, lunchboxes are packed, and classrooms fill with excitement, a new school year brings fresh opportunities for children across the Southern Tier.

For the past 20 years, the Food Bank of the Southern Tier's BackPack Program has helped students start each week ready to learn by providing nutritious, kid-friendly food to enjoy over weekends and school breaks, when school meals aren't available. Each backpack includes enough easy-to-prepare food for two breakfasts, two lunches, and two dinners, helping students stay nourished and ready to make the most of every school week.

What began in 2006 has grown into a partnership among schools, volunteers, donors, and community members who all believe every child deserves the opportunity to succeed. Over the past two decades, the program has also helped shape what's possible. The relationships built through the BackPack Program and the lessons learned along the way helped inspire the creation of our **School Food Centers,** bringing nutritious food directly into schools and expanding access for students and their families throughout the year.

"It made it less stressful trying to figure out how to feed the kids during breaks and weekends."

- Parent, Tompkins County

20 Years of Impact

- More than **1.3** million BackPack bags distributed since 2006
- More than **5.6** million pounds of food distributed since 2006
- **60,000** BackPack bags distributed in 2025
- Partnered with more than **41** school districts across our six-county service area
- Every BackPack provides **six** nutritious meals
- Began with **3,271** BackPacks in the first school year at Johnson City and Ithaca

As we celebrate 20 years of the BackPack Program, we're reminded that every backpack is more than a bag of food. It's an investment in a child's ability to return to school on Monday ready to learn, grow, and thrive.

Thank you for helping make that possible for the past two decades. Together, you've done more than fill backpacks. You've helped build stronger schools, healthier families, and communities where every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Every Person Has a Role to Play

Service Doesn't Retire

The sun shines brightly over the Watkins Glen Community Center, but the volunteers who gathered there know that Mobile Food Pantry days do not always take place under blue skies. Through rain, snow, wind, and summer heat, they show up month after month with a shared purpose: helping neighbors access nutritious food.

Among them is Lou, an 82-year-old Army veteran, retired Registered Nurse, and lifelong helper who now volunteers alongside his wife, Pam.

Like everyone on the distribution line, Lou has an important job. While volunteers load food into vehicles and greet neighbors, Lou works behind the scenes, breaking down and sorting cardboard boxes. It may seem like a small job, but it makes a big difference. By crushing boxes throughout the distribution instead of waiting until the end, Lou and fellow volunteer Heather help save the team 30 to 45 minutes of cleanup time.

"I like knowing I'm helping," Lou says simply.

That spirit of service has shaped Lou's life. After serving in the Army, he spent decades caring for others as a Registered Nurse. Today, despite significant health challenges that cause him to need a wheelchair to get around, he continues to find ways to contribute.

Lou and Pam volunteer every month at Mobile Food Pantry distributions in Burdett and Watkins Glen. What keeps them coming back is more than the work itself.

"When we distribute food, it's like the whole family is there distributing food," Lou says. "It sounds corny, but it's the truth."

The team gathers before distributions, sharing coffee, conversation, and often homemade treats. Lou, an enthusiastic baker, frequently arrives with pizzelles or cookies to share. What could feel like a heavy task becomes something special thanks to the camaraderie of nearly 30 volunteers working side by side.

For Lou and Pam, volunteering and receiving support are part of the same story.

Like many older adults living on a fixed income while navigating rising costs and medical expenses, they also turn to the Mobile Food Pantry program for support. Lou admits he was hesitant at first.

"I didn't want people to see me getting free food," he recalls. "But then we saw people we never thought would need some help who were in that line, too."

That experience reinforced something Food Bank supporters make possible every day: communities where asking for help is met with dignity, understanding, and compassion.

Thanks to you, neighbors like Lou and Pam can continue doing what they have always done: showing up for their community, contributing where they can, and reminding us that everyone has something valuable to give.

A Life-Changing Gift *(continued from page 1)*

a disability, continues to advocate fiercely for her family. Their kitchen is no longer empty, thanks in part to support from their local pantry, which helps stretch SNAP benefits and keeps fresh food on the table.

"My daughter loves the salad options," Samantha shared. "And we're obsessed with the zucchini noodles."

What began as receiving support has grown into also giving it. Samantha has helped connect her sister to vital resources, and Dee regularly donates clothing and supplies when their kids outgrow them.

"As much as we've been helped, we try to help others too," Dee said. Whether they are passing along clothes or sharing extra boxes of pantry staples with neighbors, giving back has become part of how they continue to grow.

For their family, support didn't just meet a need — it created a path forward.

"To some, it might feel like a small donation," Dee shared. "But to us, it's a lifeline."

Because of that lifeline, Samantha and Dee were able to rebuild, settle in, and create a home where their children can thrive.

Thank you for helping ensure neighbors have the food and support they need to build stronger, healthier futures.

foodbank of the Southern Tier

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Working together to build and sustain hunger-free communities throughout the Southern Tier.

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