

Valued for Dedication as Food Bank Volunteer

By Morgan Devendorf
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Approximately 13,000 people come to the Food Bank for Larimer County every month to pick up basic food items that they cannot afford. It takes someone with genuine compassion to care for the individuals who pass through those doors each day. The Food Bank has found that in veteran volunteer Tina Deringer. “We are blessed to have her as a volunteer,” said Kevin Lovett, volunteer coordinator for the Food Bank, www.foodbanklarimer.org.

For the past four years, twice a week, Deringer has volunteered in the Food Share department for the Food Bank for Larimer County. She restocks desserts and bread that will be taken home to families in need of federal assistance. The food bank is a recipient of the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund. Deringer knows what it’s like to grow up in a family that is food insecure — to not have enough money to know when your next meal will be. “Some people live to eat,” Deringer said. “I ate to live.” As a child, Deringer was the youngest of six siblings, growing up in a single-parent home outside of Baltimore, Md. After a divorce, her mother struggled to care for the family. She had been a stay-at-home mother for years. “My mother taught us to be very cognizant of a dollar,” Deringer said. “She would send us to the store with \$20, and we’d come back with everything on the list and only change left to spare.” At the age of 16, Deringer got her first job to help the family pay for food expenses and anything that she needed for school.

Knowing there was no money for her to attend college, Deringer earned a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University, where nearly 85 percent of her expenses were covered. There, she earned her degree to become an oncology nurse. Though the struggles and misfortunes of her childhood are behind her, Deringer looks back on her childhood fondly. The Food Bank is Deringer’s way of maintaining a connection between the past and present. “My family never used a food bank, but we received food stamps and assistance to heat the home and things like that,” Deringer said. “The food bank is my way of staying in touch with my past.”

The clients that Deringer serves have provided her with the inspiration and grounding that remind her why, after four years of volunteering for the Food Bank, she is still passionate about making a difference. Bundled up in her winter coat, sipping her coffee, Deringer speaks of her work at the food bank and the people she serves. “If a client of the food bank can recognize his own blessings, I should not have any difficulties identifying my own abundance of blessings,” she said. Staff members and other volunteers said they consider Deringer one of the Food Bank’s most valued volunteers. “In Food Share she’s very kind, always showing remarkable amounts of compassion. She’s a genuine person and really cares about people’s lives,” said Cassie Rosch, volunteer manager for the Food Bank.

Jan Martin, Fort Collins Food Share manager, can attest to Deringer’s genuine compassion. “Tina provides great emotional support,” Martin said. “There is a man and woman that come in here and the man is very ill. Tina has been a great emotional support.

“I remember this one time there was a woman and her baby that came in and the baby started choking!” Martin said. “Tina’s nursing background helped, though, because she dislodged whatever the baby was choking on and helped calm the mother down.”

The Food Bank for Larimer County is the source of food for more than 13,000 low-income people each month. More than half of these are children. Despite their need for food to survive, Deringer describes many of the clients as feeling ashamed and distraught that they are forced to turn to public assistance for help. “Many times when we give food out to families, there is always at least one person who is in tears because they feel embarrassed and ashamed. Most people never thought they would ever be in this position,” Deringer said.

More than one-third of the adults receiving assistance from the Food Bank have admitted to cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals altogether rather than ask for help. Staff members and other volunteers have noticed Deringer’s dedication to the Food Bank.

“Two years ago, she was Volunteer of the Year, which is a pretty big accomplishment,” said Bob Swanson, who works directly with Deringer and is the Food Share technician. “She always works special events. She knows what to do and she does a wonderful job.” Deringer, now a stay-at-home mom, has 15-year-old twins, Sean and Lindsey, who also are very involved in the Food Bank and other nonprofits in the Fort Collins area. “Tina and her kids are incredible volunteers and are usually inquiring about volunteer events before I even know about them,” Rosch said. The clients Deringer serves are very similar to her family. “I have raised my children to know that we are a privileged family, and to those whom much is given much is expected,” Deringer said.

Among households with children younger than age 18, 38 percent are single parents and 75 percent of client households in Food Share are living below the poverty line. When Lindsey was a seventh grader, she and Deringer joined the National Charity League, a mother-daughter organization that creates philanthropic opportunities for mothers and daughters to serve together. The organization’s members volunteer for the 23 different organizations, but it was the Food Bank that really resonated with Deringer and her family. Currently, Lindsey is planning a 5k race for the Food Bank as part of her service project for the International Baccalaureate program at Poudre High School. The race is expected to take place in April. “I think I’ve seen the need grow during the time I’ve volunteered,” Deringer said. “You see people who have been out of a job. Young families and elderly use the food bank on a regular basis. You become to know families and circumstances. I care about them.”

Morgan Devendorf is a Colorado State University student who wrote this story on behalf of the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund.