

Williamsfield Food Pantry

By John R. Pulliam

There's a saying that youth will be served. In Williamsfield, youth is serving. Jessica Hankinson, a 2018 graduate of Williamsfield High School and a freshman at Bethany Global University in Minneapolis, founded the new Williamsfield Area Food Pantry and Resource Center. Hankinson is president of the food pantry's board.

Jessica said the idea was planted during an independent study class during her senior year at WHS. Her teacher, Mrs. Wight, told her "You're going to graduate soon. What do you want to do (in the future)?" And we came up with the idea of the food pantry."

It makes sense as Hankinson's double majors at BGU are entrepreneurship and theology.

During a recent interview in the food pantry building, 111 W. Gale St., Hankinson said her biggest challenge was to find someone to partner with.

"I was 17 and finding a building would be impossible, so that when my business teacher ... introduced me to Lora (Kutkat.)"

Hankinson said many building owners didn't take her seriously, thinking she was doing a school project, rather than setting up a long-term business.

Kutkat and her husband, Matt Tonkin, are partnering with the young business mogul. Kutkat helped with the paperwork to set the food pantry up as a non-profit, as well as applying for grants.

Finding a suitable building was still problematic, though. Jessica wanted to find a decent building

that was also handicapped accessible.

"In the beginning of the process, I was doing a lot of random tours (of available buildings)," she said. Jessica said she even looked at possible sites through the use of Google Earth.

"It was really awesome when Lora and Matt were able to get this building," she said of the food pantry's home.

"It's flat, they don't have to worry about stairs, it's pretty accessible," Farquer said.

Why a food pantry?

"The food pantry made sense, because we got stats from the high school about how many kids are eligible for free or reduced meals," Jessica said. While not having the exact stats with her, she said it was somewhere around 30 percent.

"So there's a need," she said. "I knew I wanted to go into entrepreneurship and I have a passion for helping people."

"Jessica's always been one to be helping in the community," Farquer said. "I've known her since she was 5." The young leader is now 19.

The board of the food pantry consists of Janet Collopy, Cara Bell, Treasurer Sharon Farquer, Food Manager Leah Newell and Hankinson. The board meets on the third Monday of each month. Hankinson participates via Skype when she is at college in Minnesota.

Farquer and Newell were also present during the interview. It was apparent they are impressed with their young board president.

"She was the temporary food manager until we got a building," Farquer said.



Photo by John Pulliam

Three officers of the board of the Williamsfield Area Food Pantry & Resource center: L-R, Sharon Farquer, Jessica Hankinson and Leah Newell, stand in front of soon-to-be filled shelves at the pantry on West Gale Street.

The building is as large as some small grocery stores, which will allow the food pantry to replicate what the Knoxville Food Pantry can now do with its larger space in the basement of the Knoxville United Methodist Church.

"They're (eligible patrons) going to pick out what they're going to eat," Farquer said of what will be a shopping experience almost exactly what is found in a grocery store or supermarket.

"They feel more independent," Newell said.

The board members realize it is a food pantry, though, not a grocery store.

"We don't have any storage rooms," Jessica said. "It's going to be pretty much you see everything out in the open."

In some food pantries, there is not enough space to do this and volunteers pick out the food and fill boxes for the patrons.

The food pantry has partnered with River Bend Food Bank in the Quad Cities and Loving Bottoms of Galesburg, which provides dia-

pers.

"They don't deliver our food," Farquer said of River Bend. "We have to go and pick it up."

River Bend delivers to nearby Knoxville, but Farquer said there are apparently deliveries made to two or three other food pantries with that truck, which will be too full to bring merchandise to Billtown.

The pantry will also accept food and cash donations from businesses and the public. Monetary donations are being accepted now, with acceptance of food items still to come.

"We have a lot of donations already" from organizations, Farquer said.

Food distribution days will be 9-11 a.m. on Monday and Tuesday and 4-7 p.m. Thursday.

"That will probably start, hopefully, in May at the latest," Jessica said.

"We have to get the shelving in and River Bend has to come in and OK it," Farquer said.

"We're creating our social media presence," Hankinson said. The

Open House April 26

The Williamsfield Food Pantry and Resource Center will have a community open house from 4-6 p.m. on April 26. The idea that day is a chance to look around and see the new resource in the village.

"The whole community can come in that day," Sharon Farquer said. "We probably won't have food by then."

"Even if we do, it won't be a food distribution day," Hankinson said.

Facebook page is already up and running. By the time this article is in print, the website may also be up and running. It is williamsfieldfoodpantry.org.

The lifeblood of any community, especially small towns, is having a mix of young and older business owners. Unlike many very small towns, Williamsfield seems to be heading toward a very good mix.

"We have some young people who have some great ideas," Farquer said.

"I think a lot of credit should go to Williamsfield schools," Jessica said. Kutkat and Tonkin's Young Entrepreneurs group is another good example.

Hankinson believes these efforts will help keep young people in town after they complete their schooling or, at the least, convince them to return while still young, which is the case with Kutkat and Tonkin.

More volunteers are still needed.

"We've got some, but we're hoping some of the high school kids will volunteer, too," Farquer said.