

# Stewpot

*Faith meeting needs in our community*



A Newsletter of Stewpot Community Services

Summer 2020

## DIRECTOR'S CORNER



The last four months at Stewpot have been the most inspiring ever for me. As you know from our last newsletter, the COVID pandemic has forced Stewpot to reckon with some huge challenges. But every day, our dedicated and tireless Stewpot community has met the challenges head on and created our own surge capacity to meet the needs of those who have come to us for help.

I'm especially proud of, and awed by, our Stewpot staff. In every instance, they have risen to the needs of the moment, giving generously of their time and energy to ensure that our services remain available right now. Like you, many of them have had to make huge shifts in how they work, largely because, out of an abundance of caution, we have not been able to call on our large network of volunteers.

We've become pretty innovative over the past few months. For example, we launched our first virtual Summer Camp in mid-June, with curriculum created by our very own staff and other ministry partners. It was a huge undertaking, but the kids and teens loved it. They even asked us to continue posting content until school started!

A memory that will stay with me long after camp ends was seeing a photo of an entire family – mom, dad, and four boys – doing one of our virtual camp activities together. We first met this family two summers ago when the mom and her boys were staying at our women's shelter. While there, Stewpot was able to provide short-term rental assistance through our Rapid Rehousing program, which helped them to stabilize their housing. Now, the boys stay connected to us through their participation in our After School and Summer Camp programs.

I have also been inspired by the critical role the Opportunity Center ("OC" for short) has played during these past few months. As the only day shelter in Jackson, it is "home base" for people experiencing homelessness and provides a variety of personal and technical services for our guests.

But beginning in March, the OC also became critical for expanding our overnight shelter space because it could ensure the requisite social distancing space that the Brumfield barracks style shelter could not provide for the number of beds needed. Because it is already an emergency shelter during cold winter months, it was uniquely ready to serve as a temporary solution to a big challenge.

On July 1, after 14 weeks of 20 hour days for many staff, the OC returned to daytime only service, and Stewpot found (and is still helping to find) stable housing for many of our OC guests, also through the Rapid Housing program.

The COVID response at Stewpot is a marathon, not a sprint. We work as a team to be responsive, creative, and flexible to meet the ever-changing needs of our community. We are grateful for all of you who have been running alongside of us with your financial support, your prayers, and, when possible, your helping hands.

Speaking of helping hands, we certainly have missed our volunteers! During this COVID-19 season, volunteer service has necessarily been restricted to keep everyone safe. Please believe me when I write that we feel acutely the absence of our volunteers, many of whom feel like family! We look forward to the day when we can all gather again, serving God by serving others.

As I think of Stewpot's impact over the past four months, I am reminded of Matt Devenney, for whom one of our shelters is named and whose life was tragically cut short. He often remarked that while he could not feed and shelter all the world's hungry and homeless, he could feed and shelter those who were in front of him.

These works of mercy and compassion need all of us, and we truly are able to do it **better together**. As always, thank you for sharing what you have, so that, in the words of sacred Scripture, "those who have too little do not have too little" (2 Corinthians 8:15).

# ON THE *FRONTLINES*

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN

From ERs to take-out curbsides, people across all walks of life are witnessing heroes arise amongst their neighbors. Once such place where heroes grace its halls, day-in and day-out? The Stewpot Community Kitchen!

My name is Patrick O'Brien, and I have been volunteering in the Community Kitchen on Saturdays for over 10 years. During this pandemic, the Stewpot staff asked me and two other regulars (Dan and Wanda Quon) to continue serving on Saturdays as available, since most volunteer groups have had to suspend their service until the pandemic subsides.

Over the past five months, I have been inspired by the staff who ensure a delicious and satisfying meal is available each day, every day, in the Community Kitchen. Leading the charge on Saturdays is none other than Connie Morris, a former Stewpot employee who came out of retirement to help during this crisis. In this time of mental, physical, and spiritual need, Connie stretches resources while considering dietary restrictions – and taste! She cooks with heart and with soul.

Collaborating with Connie is Linda Johnson, the Stewpot security guard, who manages the well-being of guests, staff, and volunteers and

ensures a safe and welcoming environment for each noontime meal. She, too, helps to prepare meals and to organize supplies and volunteers. Another stakeholder in this ever-evolving process is Michelle Bingham, Stewpot's Director of Special Events and Communications. Amid the current crisis, Michelle is pitching in on Saturdays during lunch – cooking, cleaning, preparing, and serving, as well.

Some days, the trays seem to make themselves. Other days, though, this group has a meeting of the minds to figure out how to make spinach casserole complement hot dogs. Nonetheless, this group's persistence and initiative win out as they work together. Although it takes but a few moments for a guest to receive their meals each day, a great deal of effort, planning, and heart goes into each and every take-out container.

A host of volunteers supports this Community Kitchen crew; however, I am thankful for our Community Kitchen staff who forge ahead into uncertainty with the giving hands and open hearts that bolsters Stewpot's mission every day.



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## *Giving Back to* **BRUMFIELD**

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Richard came to the Billy Brumfield shelter the day after he was released from prison. Being from Indiana, he had no family in Mississippi and no other place to go while serving out his probation. As a veteran, he reached out to the VA for help; and because of Stewpot's longstanding partnership with the VA, we had a bed and a program for Richard to help him get back on his feet.

After spending a year in our Special Needs Program, Catholic Charities was able to find Richard some short-term rental assistance through their Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF) program. Because he also used that time in our Special Needs Program to apply for and obtain disability benefits, he now has an income that can help him sustain his housing. Still, he's also looking for a part-time job so that he will have something positive to do with his time.

Richard says, "I've got nothing but love and respect for Stewpot because you do so much for Jackson. And you've done so much for me!" Out of his gratitude, Richard has already started giving back to Brumfield, delivering personal care items as he is able so that Brumfield residents and guests can have what they need.

"I bought a bicycle because I gained a lot of weight from eating all the good food that people give to Brumfield," he reports. "But it also gives me a chance to stop by Brumfield to check on the guys and encourage them."

## **A NEW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP**

The mission of the Refill Jackson Initiative is to empower young adults ages 18-24 so that they are more confident, better equipped, and motivated to enter into, navigate, and stay in the workforce. Last year, RJI opened a restaurant, Refill Café, to provide both classroom and on-the-job training experience for the young adults participating in its program.

Because of the pandemic, Refill's weekday lunch service was put on pause, so Refill reached out to its community partners to help fill the need for on-the-job training. Refill's timing was perfect. Stewpot needed help on special projects, since we've limited most of our volunteer activity out of an abundance of caution.

Over the course of eight weeks, the first group of Refill trainees spent their days at Stewpot conducting inventory and helping to organize and safely store food donations. This helped them learn to work as a team and to communicate clearly with their supervisor. Additionally, they learned first-hand why it's critical to give back to their communities and care for their neighbors.

The next cohort will work almost exclusively in the Food Pantry: bagging groceries for clients, sorting and storing food, and completing inventory of donations. They will be an essential part of Stewpot's work as we continue to respond to the needs of families and senior citizens impacted both by the pandemic and by persistent poverty.

Vice President of Operations at Refill Jackson Initiative, Marshall Wade, remarks, "We are excited to integrate and practice, for the first time, the concept of community service and training as a new partnership." We are, too, Marsh, and we look forward to what new opportunities each cohort will bring to this important work.



To learn more about  
the Refill Jackson Initiative,  
visit [refilljackson.org](http://refilljackson.org).

Dear Mrs. [unclear],

I really appreciate you. All of your Saturdays meals are superb. The time spent in preparation and planning the meals, not to mention the love in having homemade mashed potatoes, and fresh greens speaks volumes of the heart you have for your GOD given ministry.

I've even shared a pic w/ my sister and Daddy. They are very grateful too.



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# STEWSPOT VIRTUAL SUMMER CAMP 2020

We began planning Summer Camp 2020, like we have every year, as soon as Summer Camp 2019 ended. We even scheduled our Briarwood Vacation Bible School for 2020 while Summer Camp 2019 was still in progress! Little did we know what changes were coming.

Schools closed in March and our After-School Program had to switch gears. We began delivering daily lunches, provided by New Gethsemane MB Church, to our kids and teens. Volunteer Jaqueline Rudder developed an Amazon Wishlist and organized people to send us snacks and kid-friendly food. Monique Ealey, Director of Education & Progress at the Mississippi Children's Museum, and her staff joined us each Thursday in the MCM van and distributed activity kits to each student.

It was during those daily deliveries that Lala, LaQuita, and I began to talk about alternate plans for Summer Camp. Once we realized that the Coronavirus wasn't going anywhere, our daily routes became intense planning sessions. What would work for our families? Our campers? How could we keep them safe? How could we stay safe? How could we provide engaging content, so the campers would want to participate?

In May, we made the tough decision to go completely virtual & provide a camp for just 40 families. We would have to supply everything: computer devices, materials, food, etc. We hired two media specialists and reached out to all our past partners to see what we could do together. Lala, LaQuita, & I had to take a crash course in Social Media, Online Streaming, Zoom, You Tube, etc. Thank goodness our media specialists, Marcus Jones & Dennis Floyd, had the patience and willingness to work with us and teach us these new skills!

Without our partners, it wouldn't have worked. The Mississippi Children's Museum continued to provide activity kits throughout the summer, as well as give our campers access to online content. Milicent Crosby with the Mississippi Food Network filmed herself making nutritional snacks & meals. Susan Sumrall and the Rev. Charles Bowdler, along with other wonderful members at Briarwood Presbyterian Church, recorded videos of themselves reading Bible stories & children's books.

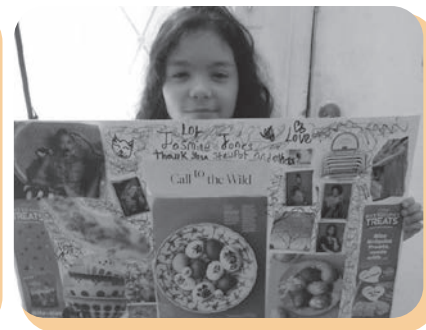
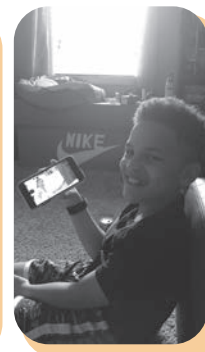
Micah Briggs, a former Children's Staff member, recorded exercise sessions with his family for our Campers. Karen Cotton, recorded art activities for each week. Rusty Bryant & Brilla provided soccer balls & Bibles and a virtual weeklong soccer camp. The Junior League of Jackson provided snacks & lunches for a week.

Lala, Quita & I even recorded ourselves cooking, reading and teaching. We developed lessons & scoured the internet for virtual activities for our campers. The campers learned about recent and current events and how those events related to them. Sheldon and Cassie Alston stored our boxes of snacks, when our building became

overcrowded. Our science teacher, Ms. Derrick, taught lessons about the Scientific Method and demonstrated several experiments. We had Zoom Meetings for Morning Check-In, Teen Talk, and Afternoon Check-Out.

It was difficult at first. We all had to get used to a new normal, including finding new ways in which we could support our students and their families. Everyone came together to help, even though no one knew what this would look like, or how it would work. But everyone was willing to lend a hand. Our Village made this work. Yes, we wanted an in person camp, we wanted to have all of our campers here at Stewspot for a fun-filled Summer, but our first priority is always to keep our children and teenagers safe.

It was a great summer with lots of learning and fun for everyone...campers, parents, and staff alike. And because of our efforts this summer, our campers are ready to start a new school year with the tools and experience they need to learn virtually. We are so grateful for all the donors who helped to make this possible, and we are so thankful for another successful Stewspot Summer Camp!





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