

Nourished & Nurtured *With Love*

By Kate Hofstetter

In the Greek language, agape (pronounced ah gah pay) means unconditional love or charity. Not charity in the sense of sharing material goods with the poor, as we typically think, but rather a selflessness and concern for the good of others without expecting anything in return. It is not borne out of emotions or attraction but from the will, and as a choice. It requires faithfulness, commitment and sacrifice.

Shortly after moving to this area from northern Virginia, Sue Lipscomb, who brought with her over 20 years' experience managing busy real estate offices, took-on an even bigger task for which she doesn't get paid a penny. Her payment, she says, is greater than money. Sue is the executive director of one of the area's largest and fastest growing nonprofit organizations: the Agape Center at Smith Mountain Lake.

It got its start in the basement of Radford Baptist Church in Moneta, as the vision of Courtney Carr and Emily Donnelly-Back. It was still in its infancy when Sue signed up as a volunteer in 2004. It wasn't long, before the dream-that-became-reality blossomed into its own thriving community. Over the years, the center has proven many times over that it stays true to its name. It took unconditional love to shore-up its foundation, just like it took unconditional love to build its membership. Unconditional love expanded the volunteer base to its current total of 400 or more dedicated souls, and unconditional love is dished out every week to hundreds of local families.

From its modest beginnings, the Agape Center soon out-grew its basement space. It moved to a leased property in old Moneta, and became an independent 501c3 corporation. Once again, in 2012 it out-grew its space, and made the move to its current location at 1159 Promised Land Road in Moneta. It now occupies 27,000 square feet in what was once a dress factory, years ago. Today, a total of 18 local churches support and are members of the center.

"We serve between 900 to 950 families a month," Sue said, "Or nearly 3,000 individuals, if you average three people per family."

Expanding on that old adage of teaching a man to fish instead of just giving him fish, the center strives to show its clients how to take control of their lives through spiritual enrichment, along with classes on nutrition, sewing, budgeting and other life skills. They also offer a "Getting Ahead" class which consists of two classes weekly over a 9 week period. Besides dealing with just financial poverty, the conquering of "spiritual poverty" and "relationship poverty" are addressed.

"Situational poverty is not what gives us the largest number of clients," Sue explains. "It is generational poverty that affects the most people." Agape's volunteers instruct their clients on how to break this cycle, by attending to more than just physical needs.

The Agape Center's mission as stated on its website is: "To reflect God's love by giving of ourselves and our resources, as we submit to the leadership of the Holy Spirit to mentor and help



individuals turn or return to a Christ-centered life.”

Its goal: “...attending to the felt needs of man, while addressing man’s spiritual need in a manner that gives God the glory!”

To accomplish this, each client family seeking assistance is assigned a mentor to listen to immediate concerns and future hopes, and to pray with the family. They are also there to help clients set goals in employment and education, along with physical and spiritual goals. In total, the center has 21 different departments, each with its own leader, each dedicated to serving their clientele.

Every family receives food once every 30 days from the center’s “pantry”. The center also offers “shopping trips” through its clothing “store” and appliance and furniture section. There is a library, toy center, and linens for use in both the kitchen and bedroom. There is even firewood available, thanks to a committee of volunteers who go onsite to cut donated trees. The log-sized pieces of wood are then taken to a storage facility, where they are split into firewood.

During the months of November and December, clients are treated to mulled cider and cookies as they shop in the Center’s Christmas store for gifts for their children. Each family is also presented with a Christmas basket that has been prepared by volunteers on the Christmas Basket Committee, in the department called “The Basket Factory”. These baskets have an individual theme, and each family receives one to take home and share.

Besides the Christmas baskets, the center also distributes birthday baskets and nursery baskets. Last year, 1,085 Christmas baskets were distributed, along with about the same number of birthday baskets, and at least 50 nursery baskets.

Another favorite gift among clients are women’s purses that have been stuffed with smaller gifts of jewelry, perfume, potholders, dishtowels, shampoo, soap and other spa items. For men, there are shaving supplies, games,

books, puzzles, etc.

In the Center’s gift shop there is a “free” bookcase, where items gleaned from other departments are placed. These items include candy, cookies, jerky, clothing, linens, and books. Occasionally, unusual donations are received. For example: one year, over 1,000 packages of lavender napkins were donated. The volunteers in “Intake” keep their eyes and ears open for such things that will help round out a gift basket. Once they caught a great sale on men’s flannel shirts at Walmart, and they were able to buy several. One year, Little Caesars teamed up with Feeding America and served over 200 pizzas to clients and volunteers.

“The Porch”, a small waiting room just inside the front door, is charming and inviting. Sue met us there and offered a tour of the center. She and Jack are also pictured outside the front door of the center.

As folks mend, they often return the favor by becoming volunteers and/or donors themselves. Besides the used household items and canned goods, donations of money come from numerous sources, including the Amazon “Smile Program”, and the Kroger “Community Gift Program”. Both retailers will donate a nominal amount, at no cost to shoppers, for each order that is placed online. Plus, each year the Center holds fund-raisers, the largest being its annual golf tournament. Earlier this year, they received over \$9,000 from RVG (Roanoke Valley Gives) as one of the nonprofits to share in the annual fund-raiser. The money will be used to complete the heating and AC systems in the household, linen and book departments. It will also be used for an alert system and intercom for medical and other emergencies.

During the growing season, Beckner’s Produce Stand on Booker T Washington road in Wirtz donates fresh vegetables to the Center, but much of their fresh produce also comes from Feeding America in Salem, now called Feeding Southwest Virginia.

There is an interesting story behind the birth of Feeding America:

Agape Center CONTINUED

John Van Hengel, a retiree in Arizona in the late 1960s, decided to become a volunteer at a local soup kitchen. One day he observed a woman rummaging through the garbage bins of a grocery store and he struck up a conversation with her. It seems she regularly foraged for food that had been discarded by the grocer. She did this to feed her children. During their conversation the woman made the observation that instead of throwing food out there should be a place where it could be stored for people to pick up, similar to banks storing money.

Van Hengel was stirred into action and soon established St Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix. It was the first of many to follow. During its initial year, the young food bank distributed some 275,000 pounds of food to people in need. Word of its success soon spread, and by 1977 food banks were established in 18 cities across the nation.

In 1979, Van Hengel next created a national organization calling it Second Harvest. Then, in 2008, the name was changed to Feeding America to better reflect its mission.

Today there are 200 food banks across the country, making Feeding America the Nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization. Through Feeding America, 40 million people are served, including 12 million children and 7 million seniors.

Here are some more, eye-opening statistics: Each year in this country, an estimated 72 billion pounds of safe, edible food goes to waste, while 37 million people struggle with hunger. This means that as much as 40% of the food grown, processed and transported in the US is never consumed. More food reaches landfills and incinerators than any other single material.

Getting to this food before it is destroyed, and putting it in a central location for distribution is what food banks are all about. Feeding America calls it "food rescuing". They do this by working with manufacturers, distributors, retailers, food service companies, and farmers. Volunteers pick what's left in fields after the harvest. They also take produce that is nutritious and edible, but cannot be sold because

of cosmetic reasons. In one instance, a farmer couldn't find a buyer for a million pounds of tomatoes. In another instance, a manufacturer made a mistake in the labeling of a snack bar. A food bank in Tennessee rescued millions of pounds of green beans that were snapped too short to be sold at the grocery store.

Working alongside Sue and the other volunteers at the center is Sue's husband, Jack, who heads up the maintenance department. Jack is a retired aircraft accident investigator. Moving to the Lake in 1987, Jack continued his work as an accident investigator until 2016.

"He kept a plane at the airport," Sue said, "And flew to the various sites he was called on to investigate."

News of the accomplishments of the Agape Center at SML has spread, and three other communities have decided to start their own centers. One center is in Vinton, and the other is in Lynchburg. Currently, Sue is working with folks in Christiansburg toward establishing a center there. All three fall under the by-laws and board of directors of the Moneta center.

If you would like to get involved as a volunteer with this worthy organization, you may apply online at the center's Website. Or if you would like to make a donation of a check or money order, it may be mailed to: The Agape Center of SML, PO Box 573, Moneta, VA 24121.

Donations of household goods were suspended during the COVID 19 pandemic, which was still active during the writing of this article, so call or go online before donating household items. The center's phone number is 540-296-0609. Its website is: www.agapecentersml.org

Agape welcomes donations of school supplies, towels, sheets, curtains, silverware, pots and pans, baby equipment, sofas, dressers, bed sets (mattress and springs), and appliances, including air conditioners.



