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For immediate release

Feed Arkadelphia Seeks to Address Hunger, Reduce Waste, Reach Hearts

By Mandy Halbert

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As a senior in high school, Reanna Johnson first realized her passion for ending hunger through her volunteer work with a local food pantry. After getting plugged in to Ouachita's Elrod Center for Family and Community freshman year and gaining support across campus, she knew she wanted to build a way to make a tangible impact in Arkadelphia.

Now a rising senior at Ouachita, she has created Feed Arkadelphia, a program similar to Meals on Wheels that partners with Ouachita's food service provider, Sodexo, to redistribute Ouachita's unused cafeteria food to families in need in the Arkadelphia community.

"Universities alone waste 1.6 million tons of food annually," Johnson said. "In 2019, 20% of people in Arkadelphia struggled with food insecurity."

During her work with the Elrod Center freshman year, she saw this firsthand.

"On Wednesdays, I'd help pass out food to people, and I got to hear a lot of their stories," said Johnson, a psychology and social justice studies double major from Rio Vista, Texas. "I also saw a lot of people that I actually knew. Seeing how a lot of them were affected by hunger and food insecurity made me realize how relevant the problem was.

"That's what started making me want to do something about it," she added. "Anyone is capable of making a difference. You've just got to try."

Johnson began to develop the idea for Feed Arkadelphia with the Elrod Center freshman year. While the idea initially seemed improbable due to logistical challenges, Johnson applied for a Kluck Service Enrichment Grant – university grants awarded to enhance student programs – and the Elrod Center connected her with an Arkadelphia family they knew was in need of help.

“My roommate and I cooked meals and bought a few groceries for that family,” Johnson said. “When I would go to the family’s house, if they needed me to, I would babysit the kids. I got to see these kids live in dire conditions that I felt were unacceptable.”

Because the family struggled to make ends meet, their dinners often consisted of just a piece of bread and a slice of lunch meat.

“I remember one time when I was babysitting the kids, they asked me if we could eat,” Johnson said. “I looked in their cupboards to see what I could make. All they had was cereal, but no milk. Even though I was helping that one family once a week, it wasn’t enough. It made me want to do more. I realized that more people were struggling with the same problem.”

Johnson discussed the idea of Feed Arkadelphia with her advisor, Dr. Myra Houser, assistant professor of history and coordinator of Ouachita’s Social Justice Studies Program.

“I work with a lot of students who have ideas about social change and programs such as Feed Arkadelphia that can really help people materially, but it is pretty rare for folks to have as much drive as Reanna has to actually implement, grow and sustain a program like this,” Houser said. “I think that her involvement speaks to her big heart, her ability to be practically-minded and her work ethic. She has all of those in droves, and she carries an amazing, joyful spirit with her as she does.”

Johnson then presented Feed Arkadelphia to Sodexo in 2019. Sodexo not only agreed to help but also hired Johnson to their marketing team and for part-time work in the Ouachita Commons. Additionally, Feed Arkadelphia was incorporated into Sodexo’s “Stop Hunger” campaign.

Feed Arkadelphia officially launched in February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. When Ouachita returned to fully residential learning for the 2020-2021 academic year, the program really took off. Every Tuesday from 4 to 7 p.m., Johnson and anywhere from 12 to 25 Ouachita student and Sodexo volunteers assembled up to 85 meals from the Ouachita Commons’ unused food. The volunteers then delivered the meals to 30 families within the community.

“The mission of the Elrod Center is to engage with the community in areas where the energy of our students and the resources of our campus can be brought together in a mutually beneficial way,” said Ian Cosh, vice president for community and international engagement emeritus. “The Feed Arkadelphia program is an excellent example of how we harness the human talent and material resources of the university to address a specific need.”

The program has since been awarded another Kluck Service Enrichment grant that allows it to include additional purchased food items with the meals. Johnson also has been recognized with a national Experience Matters award from Sodexo and the Ray of Light Award from the Sunrise Rotary Club of Arkadelphia.

“It really is a group collaboration,” Johnson said. “I am very honored, but this is not a one-man show.” “Reanna puts in an extraordinary amount of effort each day and goes above and beyond for our students and community,” said Kari Ledford, Sodexo’s retail and marketing manager at Ouachita.

“This has led to a lot of attention from other Sodexo-supported universities across the nation inquiring about the process and start up,” Ledford added. “We are proud of her for stepping up and being an advocate for families and educating our community on the effects that hunger can cause within the body and also mental health and education.”

Johnson and the other students who serve with the program have learned that it's about more than simply providing a meal.

" IT'S NOT JUST GIVING THEM A BOX OF FOOD. IT'S MAKING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS, BEING THERE FOR THEM, PRAYING FOR THEM. "

Reanna Johnson

"You get to make relationships with these families," Johnson said. "It's not just giving them a box of food. It's getting to love on people. It's making lasting relationships, being there for them, praying for them. You get to connect with someone."

For Tehya Hinkson, a senior studio art and education double major from Benton, Ark., serving as a volunteer through Feed Arkadelphia "is an amazing opportunity to give back to this community that gives so much to us. ... We can give back to them and let them have a little easier and better week. There is nothing better than arriving at their homes and seeing the smiles on their faces."

"I love to be a volunteer of Feed Arkadelphia," said Molly Mai Borneman, a senior Christian studies/Christian ministries and missions double major from Greenfield, Tenn. She said the direct impact and relationships she has built with those she serves has been a highlight. "It's the simple connections like that that make such an impact, and that's why I love it."

Following her graduation this coming December, Johnson hopes to work full-time with a nonprofit and dreams of one day starting a nonprofit of her own.

"I hope to keep motivating people to know that they can make a difference," Johnson said. "The world might seem too broken sometimes, but even the smallest act of kindness can make a difference."



Mandy Halbert is a 2021 graduate from Allen, Texas, with majors in communications & media/multimedia journalism and graphic design.