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Northbrook pair's Hunger Project feeds needy

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October 27, 2009

By KARIE LUC ANGELL CONTRIBUTOR

Halloween trick or treating for everyone's sweet tooth takes place from 3 to 7 p.m. Saturday, but OurNeighbors Chrissy Ekenberg and Mario Leaman hope Northbrookians eat well 365 days of the year.

Ekenberg and Leaman, both Northbrook residents for 16 years, are moms on a mission who need no flashy Halloween costumes to sweeten their cause.

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Mario Leaman (right) and Chrissy Ekenberg of the Hunger Project pick up donated food during a farmer's market at Our Lady of the Brook.

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Chrissy Ekenberg (left) and Mario Leaman (right) are shown with Gary Eimerman (second from left) and Suzie Wilson of the Hunger Project pick up donated food during the farmer's market at Our Lady of the Brook on Oct. 14 in Northbrook.

Not that they need to go door to door either to promote the Hunger Project, which speaks for itself as Northbrook's newest 501(c)(3) charity.

"We believe that need is not seasonal, nor should giving be," Ekenberg said. "We involve our children in day-to-day Hunger Project activities and instill the importance of giving year round."

Launched last June, the Hunger Project assists regional food banks which serve deserving families who may be near neighbors just a few humble doors away.

"Just in our area alone, we've seen an increase in food pantry usage that once supported 250 families which over the last year has doubled," said Ekenberg, who delivers donated baked goods in her minivan to Glenview's Northfield Township Food Pantry. Ekenberg and husband Ken have two children Dylan, 14, a Wood Oak eighth grader and Brad, 10, a fourth grader at Shabonee School. Ekenberg also sells antiques via the Internet.

"We hope to expand our base network of volunteers and businesses to link with food pantries and soup kitchens," Ekenberg said. "The need for assistance keeps growing so we're growing to support more and more of our partner pantries and shelters to feed the hungry."

Friends for 13 years, Ekenberg and Leaman literally stepped up to the plate when the economy made it harder for others to put food on the table.

"A simple change in someone's family status, income, or an illness could cause any of us to need a supplement to feed their families from the food pantry," said Leaman, who, with husband Brad, are parents to Monica, 14, an eighth grader, and to Luke, 12, a sixth grader, both enrolled at Northbrook's St. Norbert School. Leaman is a spin cycling instructor who enjoys cooking and reading.

"The people on our board have the desire to serve the area hungry from past experiences of being on the receiving end of the generosity of others," Leaman said.

During Thanksgiving and December, the Northfield Township Food Pantry offers grocery certificates to certified families. Newly opened soup kitchens and food pantries also experience extra holiday requests. This means more is asked of current and untapped community donor sources.

"Everyone one needs help from others at some point whether it's illness, job loss or something else," said Leaman. "Volunteerism helps bring the community together by getting people get involved in their community and giving back."

"This can only make our community better by taking an active role in something that interests you in your community."

With summer over, local produce has naturally curtailed. Although grocers such as Sunset Foods of Northbrook still donate, the supply of fresh produce dwindles as temperatures drop. Northbrookians can no longer donate freshly-picked homegrown garden treats.

The Northbrook Farmers Market, which ended its successful run in mid-October at Northbrook's Our Lady of the Brook Catholic Church, donated thousands of pounds of produce from five different Farmers Markets regionally this season.

"The farmers that come to the Farmers Market weekly are very generous with donations to local food pantries, and are very willing to give," said Leaman. "The recipient agencies are grateful for fresh produce to give their clients and the clients are grateful for the fresh produce to give their families."

"Food pantries mostly provide shelf-stable items, so the fresh produce is well received by the families who are sometimes waiting at the pantry on drop off day."

The Hunger Project asks people of all ages and backgrounds to help.

"The directors, who were already involved in hunger related community service projects individually, had the opportunity to pool their resources, share information and aid each other to make a stronger, more efficient, unified group to better serve the needs of the hungry," said Ekenberg. "Fellow board members are Northbrook residents Gary Eimerman, Donna Fishman, Margaret Hennessy, and Northfield resident Dan Jarabka, and Elgin resident, Wynette Edwards.

"In fact, Donna Fishman's son, Max worked with us for his bar mitzvah community service project," Ekenberg said.

To learn more about the Hunger Project, please contact either Ekenberg or Leaman via www.hungerprojectillinois.org. To reach Ekenberg directly, email Christine@hungerprojectillinois.org or at (847) 507-9995. Mario Leaman can be reached at marlo@hungerprojectillinois.org or at (847) 254-5280. Volunteers are needed and welcome.



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