



No Child Goes Hungry

How programs like the Summer Kids' Meal Program give kids a FIGHTING CHANCE

By Kelly Chandler



The statistics on childhood hunger, while staggering, don't always paint a relatable picture.

Do you know what is relatable though? That rumbling, achy pain when your stomach is empty. For many of us, we have the resources to address it by opening the refrigerator, taking out lunchmeat and cheese or peanut butter and jelly, and making ourselves a sandwich.

But what if your refrigerator is empty? Or you don't have access to a refrigerator because you're living out of your family's car?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 17 million households struggled to find enough food to eat in 2022 and the data is expected to reflect a bigger rise in 2023 and 2024. The report also found that 13 million children, more than 18 percent of all children living in the US, lived in food insecure households.

Prior to this, hunger had been on the decline in this country. The increase in food insecure households can be tied to several things—extended SNAP benefits were scaled back just over a year ago, since 2000 housing costs have risen 65 percent nationally and grocery prices are 25 percent higher than they were five years ago. At the same time, incomes have remained relatively stagnant. All these factors contribute to households having to make tough choices, and because of this, children suffer. At The Open Link, we recognize that summer can be a challenging time for kids' nutrition, so we work to fill the gaps.

Enter the Summer Kids' Meal Program. Having just finished its eighth year of existence at The Open Link, it has seen significant growth. Open to all kids 18 and under living in the Upper Perkiomen School District, nutritious breakfasts and lunches were served to-go style at locations in Green Lane, Red Hill, Pennsburg, East Greenville and Hereford Township weekdays all summer long.

Registration wasn't required, and all meals were no cost to participants.

The last two years have seen 30 and 31 percent increases in demand, respectively, and this year a staggering 17,668 meals were served. The program is something that local families have welcomed with open arms.

"It's really a relief to not have to worry about what they're going to eat," said an East Greenville mom, who asked to remain anonymous. She explained her three kids qualify for free breakfasts and lunches during the school year. She represents the close to 30 percent of all Upper Perk households with children who qualify for meal benefits while in school.

"We love this program, and all of you, and we're thankful to live in this community."

Nutrition Services Coordinator Brooke Harvey said the program does a great job taking the guesswork out of how to bridge the food gap for parents who rely on free and reduced meals during the year, as well as parents who are simply having a hard time in the current economy making ends meet.

"We see a lot of the families we serve in the food pantry take advantage of this program as well as others...It's indicative of the rise in pantry use across the county that our partners are seeing as well. As the need has gone up for food and pantry services, so has the need for summer meals."

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“What really struck me this year was that we saw consistent visits from most of the families all summer long,” she said. “They relied on us each week to help feed their kids.”

Want to get involved and help with food and nutrition programs at The Open Link? Contact Volunteer Coordinator Katherine Foster at 215-679-4112 or volunteers@theopenlink.org or visit www.theopenlink.org.



“Faithful Four” Helps Lift Up Those in Need

By Kelly Chandler

Fabulous, facilitative, fantastic, fervorous... There are a lot of adjectives that could describe what we'll call our “Faithful Four” sponsors.

What are sponsors? They are businesses, organizations and groups that commit on an annual basis to sustain the work of The Open Link. But while many help support our mission with vital gifts, the Faithful Four have given generously, at the highest level, for many years. Our programs and services simply wouldn't be possible without their help!

Programs like vital utility assistance to keep the electricity, heat and water on, food to fill the shelves of the pantry and onto the tables of struggling families, Meals on Wheels for seniors and employment counseling and resume help to give people an opportunity for gainful employment. Sponsorship funding goes to paying for infrastructure, staffing and much more too.

So with that we'd like to introduce them – Gillespie Electric, MillerKnoll, Stauffer Glove & Safety and Titanium Finishing. These local businesses, in just the past five years, have given an astounding \$224,705 to help us help our neighbors. The Open Link couldn't be the resource for people in need in the Upper Perkiomen Valley without them.

It is a huge honor and a blessing to be entrusted by them to do this work in the community. Please patronize and support them in any way you can so they, in turn, can continue to help us help our neighbors. Thank you, Faithful Four!

Interested in finding out more about The Open Link's community sponsorship program and its benefits? Please contact Kelly Chandler, Development and Communications Director, at 267-910-5943 or communications@theopenlink.org.



Linda Connell Retires After Decades of Making a Difference

By Kelly Chandler



It's the end of an era. Linda Connell, a longtime counselor and assistant director at The Open Link, has officially retired after 38 years helping the Upper Perkiomen Valley community.

Linda Connell was hired in 1986 by Executive Director Ro Hartzell and has served under six different executive directors. She originally worked out of the basement of what is now The Center in East Greenville. She began her duties helping people with housing, utilities, benefits and more.

Over the years and multiple transitions, she stepped in as an interim executive director twice and helped with the strategic work of the merger between the Upper Perkiomen Senior Center and The Open Line before it became The Open Link in 2013.

She is someone who is described by her peers and the board as calm, wise, thoughtful, patient, kind and intelligent. She is rarely rattled, as has been evidenced on many occasions. Linda is insightful and picks up on nuances that many miss. She has been a leader when called to lead and is always, always, a strong advocate for the people of this community.

"This job has allowed me to develop my strengths and my passions and has also given me the opportunity for professional development," she said. "When we know better, we can do better, as Stu [Bush, former Executive Director] says. I have enjoyed the fact that every day is different and is always interesting."

When asked what she was most proud of in her career at The Open Link, she noted that becoming a volunteer with the Women's Center of Montgomery County was a crucial point in her involvement in domestic violence services and victim support and in bringing that program to the valley.

She noted the positive collaboration with the Women's Center and the founding of the Upper Perkiomen Domestic Violence Task Force. Out of that came other partnerships and more recently, the founding of the Upper Perk HUB, a countywide

partnership between law enforcement, area non-profits, and the Upper Perkiomen School District, which aims to provide early intervention and other services to people in times of crisis.

She was also happy to have had the opportunity to complete training to become a trauma-competent professional through the Lakeside Global Institute, which she credits with shifting her view on behavior as it pertains to people who experienced trauma.

Lastly, she appreciates becoming an advocate at the county level for housing and behavioral health needs, as well as speaking with legislators on what she has seen in our communities and reflected on the good that comes from being a part of a larger group with a bigger voice.

Her long career has left her with many memories but she hopes retirement has both some memorable and less-than-remarkable times in store.

"I have some concerts and live music lined up and a stack of books to tackle," she said, smiling. Her goals for the first year also include dedicating more time and energy to her wellness and volunteering.

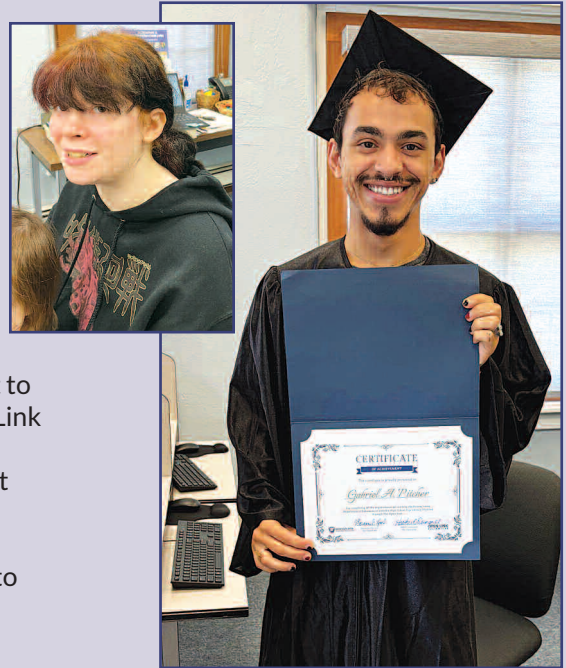
Luckily for The Open Link, she has stepped up already to volunteer administering tests to students in the high school equivalency program. Those tests help students achieve their PA Department of Education-recognized diploma and move onto higher education and gainful employment.

Thank you, Linda, for your many years of dedicated service to TOL! You have left an indelible mark on us, as an organization and, more importantly, the people we serve.

High School Equivalency Program

Congratulations to our two recent graduates! Diovanna and Gabriel completed their High School Equivalency (HSE) classes and passed a series of High School Equivalency HSE tests over the summer, making them official high school graduates. Diovanna, a young mom, plans to go on to attend college through the EARN program with Montgomery County, and Gabriel is attending Montgomery County Community College this fall, majoring in life sciences.

The HSE program at The Open Link is a gateway for adult learners to obtain their high school diplomas, recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Often, these learners had significant barriers that didn't allow them to finish high school and find it difficult to pursue a career or dreams of higher education later in life. The Open Link has a qualified instructor and volunteer tutors who hold high school equivalency test preparation classes each Tuesday and Thursday night throughout the year. Because the program is tailored to each student, there is no wrong time to join the program and start preparing for the tests. Currently, there are 11 adult learners enrolled and on the path to becoming high school graduates. For more information, check out our website - www.theopenlink.org.



The Center Gets a Facelift!



Thanks to a recent award from the Pennsylvania Department of Aging Senior Community Center Grant program, the Center's lower level will be undergoing a remodel in late autumn, 2024. The Center is busier than ever and needs some additional space to host active adults with clubs, activities and the occasional game of pool. Plans for the space include new flooring, custom storage and some cozy touches like a coffee bar to make it feel warm and inviting. Stay tuned for progress reports and an open house when completed!

“Hope Grows Here”

The Garden Helps Supply Fresh Produce for the Pantry



There’s been no shortage of tasty tomatoes, succulent squash or crisp cucumbers. In fact, the Hope Grows Here Garden, located adjacent to The Open Link main office at 452 Penn Street in Pennsburg, has been a wonderful source of nutritious veggies and fruits for the food pantry.

“We’ve had a tremendous group of volunteers who are doing the watering, weeding and harvesting almost daily,” said Katherine Foster, Volunteer Coordinator. “We’re so grateful for them! They’re playing an important role in supplementing the produce available to our pantry clients.”

While this season’s numbers haven’t been finalized yet, the garden has brought new life to the formerly empty space. An eagle scout project constructed by Joshua Spaar, currently has all the staples including delicious fresh herbs, flowers to attract pollinators and a lineup ready to go in for fall to include lettuce, kale, beets and more.

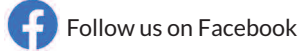
Thanks to all our volunteers who are helping to make the garden project a success!





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The Open Link is a 501(C)(3) corporation. A copy of our official registration and financial information may be obtained from the PA Dept. of State by calling toll free, within PA 1.800.732.0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.



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UPCOMING AT THE OPEN LINK



Thanksgiving Meal Distribution: November 1-November 27



Community Partnership Breakfast: November 22 at 8 a.m.
at the Perkiomen School, Parents Hall



Operation Holiday Cheer: December 1- December 23



Planting Hope Garden Party: Sunday, March 30 at 12:30 p.m.
at La Masseria at Bella Vista Golf Course

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Ways To Get Involved

Give Online: Gifts can be made online by visiting www.theopenlink.org or by scanning the QR code with your phone to make your gift to The Open Link today!



Give by Traditional Mail: Complete the information on the enclosed envelope and return with your check to make your gift to The Open Link!

Volunteer: Pantry Support, Meals on Wheels Packers and Drivers, Tutors, Senior Center Ambassadors, Receptionist, Communications and Fundraising Help.

Host a Food Drive: Have a birthday or anniversary party, have a gathering to "gather" the items on our pantry wish list, create a Cereal Society to provide cereal to The Open Link each month.