

# **Mobile Loaves & Fishes Takes to the Streets to Feed Austin's Homeless and Working Poor**

By Ashley Gatewood

Mobile Loaves & Fishes' mission is to provide food, clothing, and dignity to our brothers and sisters in need. The organization accomplishes this with the help of over four thousand volunteers who prepare and deliver meals to those in need throughout Austin as well as San Antonio. Founded in 1998 by six parishioners of Saint John Neumann Catholic Church, Mobile Loaves & Fishes began by distributing 75 sack lunches one night and has now grown to provide over 120,000 meals per year. In addition, several other area churches have organized their own branches of the group. Ruth Dore, the volunteer coordinator for the Saint John Neumann Catholic Church location, spoke with me about the logistics required to operate the organization as well as how Mobile Loaves and Fishes managed to expand so rapidly in the past seven years.

Alan Graham and several of his friends who recognized the need in the community for a group that provides meals to the hungry created Mobile Loaves & Fishes. Alan is a visionary. He envisions Mobiles Loaves & Fishes for Texas, the United States, the world, Dore said. One of the greatest talents of a true visionary is to pull people together for a cause. This is a talent Graham obviously possesses. Not only has he mobilized thousands to donate time to the organization, but he has also gathered financial resources from the public. Currently, Mobile Loaves & Fishes has six catering trucks, five of which have been donated and sponsored by various Austin-area businesses. The sixth was acquired when a former volunteer passed away and bequeathed a truck to the organization.

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Ruth Dore Checks One of the Trucks Used by Mobile Loaves and Fishes to Serve the Homeless

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Dore explained the logistics of running the Mobile Loaves & Fishes branch at Saint John Neumann Catholic Church. To keep the operation running smoothly, it is necessary to have an in-depth schedule to coordinate volunteers. There are 68 teams of people called make-ready teams who prepare the food in the church's kitchen. There are another 68 teams who work on the truck and distribute the food. Throughout the month various teams work on various days. Each truck performs one meal run in the evenings, although some days lunch runs are provided as well.

Running the trucks can often be costly, especially with fuel prices at an all-time high. Each run costs approximately \$250 and that includes the food, gas, and insurance. Therefore, operational costs are roughly \$15,000 a month. Most of the money comes from personal donations and several grants from family foundations have been received.

Dore stressed that they cannot rely solely on food donations, but that there is a bread ministry that picks up pastries that can no longer be sold from three different Starbucks. In addition, Great Harvest provides them with a variety of bread including sliced, sweet, and whole loaves twice a week. An egg ministry provides dozens of hard-boiled eggs per week, which are the second most requested item by the meal recipients (the number one item is socks). Austin-area schools and other organizations have sponsored food drives that raised donations for Mobile Loaves & Fishes. Although acquiring food for such a large organization may seem like a daunting task, many people have put forth their time and effort to ensure that those less fortunate will be fed.

Despite the fact that the food is distributed free of charge to the hungry, Dore stressed that customer service is an important aspect of their work. We serve people. We don't open [the truck] up and say help yourself. We serve people, we talk to people because one of the greatest needs these people have is for somebody to recognize that they exist, say hello, and smile.

Volunteers range in age from three years old to over eighty years old. Various Boy Scout troops, Girl Scout troops, charity leagues, and youth groups volunteer. Dore stated that while Mobile Loaves & Fishes started at a Catholic church, many volunteers are of other religions or part of non-religious groups such as businesses and the Dell Community Center. She credits a well-maintained database and the help of God for coordinating so many volunteers who give their time freely.

Mobile Loaves & Fishes also runs a unique program called MLF shares. MLF shares are coupons good for a specific dollar amount and are redeemable at Walgreens and several other businesses. The idea behind the MLF shares is that a person can purchase them and give them, in lieu of money, to someone in need. Since a stipulation of the shares is that they cannot be redeemed for tobacco, alcohol, or cash, donating persons know that their money is not being misused.

Recently Mobile Loaves & Fishes started a new program called Habitat on Wheels, which aims to place homeless people in permanent, affordable housing. They have purchased their first gently used travel trailer and placed it in a local RV park. With the help of Richard Troxell at House the Homeless, Mobile Loaves & Fishes has placed their first homeless tenant in sustainable housing. They are in the process of purchasing three more trailers and hope to own their own RV park in the future.

Mobile Loaves & Fishes' holistic approach to helping those less fortunate with respect and kindness has earned them an excellent reputation. Their good work has not gone unnoticed, and last year they received the Governor's Award for Volunteerism from Governor Rick Perry. To learn more about volunteer opportunities, read further about the Habitat on Wheels program, and stay informed about the organization's work, visit <http://www.mobileloavesandfishes.org>.