



United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County

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Strengthening Community Ties Through COVID-19 at Owen Middle School

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It's a Thursday afternoon and Owen Middle School social worker, counselors, United Way Community School Coordinator, and Western Carolina Master of Social Work intern are all gathered virtually to talk about students and families needs for the week moving into month two of the coronavirus crisis. Between phone calls, a weekly survey, and families direct text messages, Warcolt students and parents in the Swannanoa River Valley are sharing where they're feeling stress and in what ways they're needing support. Meanwhile, a few blocks away, a local church is holding a collection drive from its members, thanks to a call from Josh Wells, United Way Community School Coordinator, to share fresh food, which will be collected alongside bags of fresh produce from Bounty & Soul and delivered each week to those families front doors. This is community in action and this is community schools at work, crisis or not.

What Can I Do to Help in Some Small Way...

"It could really be overwhelming to look at the need in our valley and wonder how we can possibly meet all of this need, shares **Valley Hope Church Pastor Anthony Rodriguez**. "That's not really the right question though. The question needs to be what can I do now, that in some small way starts to address that problem."



With a now-overflowing food pantry at Owen Middle School thanks to Valley Hope Church, that question and those small actions are certainly helping to meet so many needs for OMS families and in the greater Swannanoa community. And this work of coming together to share and meet one another and collectively create systems of support began long before the COVID crisis. "They've been great," shares **OMS School Counselor Buffy Weathington**, reflecting on the support of Valley Hope. "We've had members there come out to fold, organize, and keep our clothes closet in order." They're also regular volunteers at weekly Homework Dinners, running the registration table, mentoring students, serving food,

and they show up regularly with weed eaters, mulch, and yard tools to work outside the school and help keep the campus trimmed and feeling warm and welcoming for the students, adds Wells.



Layering Support Systems to Meet Community Needs

"There are so many people who are stepping up to say how can I help, what can I do, do you need, can I do this, and that's been really profound for me," shares Mrs. Weathington. "We work really hard to cultivate our shared sense of community and it's times like these where you can really see how strong that connection is because everybody is truly helping everybody."

Since the start of COVID-19 Buncombe County Schools has shifted to deliver weekly meals to students in the school district, serving nearly 80,000 breakfast and lunch meals each week. Local nonprofit Bounty & Soul helps provide additional fresh food resources, offering twice-weekly drive-through markets to help meet Swannanoa and Black Mountain residents' needs. Before coronavirus, they were operating one of their markets within the middle school each week, providing a wellness and food literacy education activity for students as well as the free fresh produce pickup.

If We Each Do Something Small...

"Owen Middle School really fills an important place for us," says **Karla Gardener, Director of Community Engagement at Bounty & Soul**. "These families have become family for us. We just meet you where you're at and don't ask a lot of invasive questions. There are many individuals finding themselves seeking out programs like ours that have not before. People come to food resource programs like this with a little bit of shame sometimes, so when you're greeted without question and with compassion, that really goes a long way.

And you'll find a healthy dose of that in the weekly drive-through markets as Bounty & Soul volunteers play music and dance in vegetable costumes to meet families curbside. And for those unable to drive through those lines, Owen Middle School Staff, Valley Hope, and United Way are all coming together to help meet needs in addition to what's being shared through Buncombe County Schools.

"As a father of an Owen Middle School student, I am thrilled that my fellow OMS parents, classmates of my daughter, and the relational work throughout the valley, has access to a variety of resources that take care of the whole person educationally, nutritionally, and emotionally," shares Rodriguez. "I cannot solve all of the valley's problems myself. My church can't. The school staff alone can't. The question is in the places where we're doing nothing, how can we do something. Something is better than nothing and if a lot of us start doing something, eventually something big starts to happen."

Get Connected in Community Through COVID-19 and Beyond:

- **Find a Volunteer Opportunity** with Bounty & Soul and other community nonprofits through our volunteer center Hands On Asheville-Buncombe (https://www.handsonasheville.org/need/?s=1&need_init_id=2992)
- **Donate to Support** this connective Community Work throughout Buncombe County (<https://www.unitedwayabc.org/donate-now>)
- **Learn more** about United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County's response efforts to COVID-19 (<https://www.unitedwayabc.org/covid-19>)



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