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Ruben Rosario: For those who hunger, there's help

By Rubén Rosario

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It's been a tough year for Julie Kurschner and the Ersfeld family. How tough? Far tougher than mine, for sure.

Kurschner, a mother of six, lost her St. Paul home of nearly seven years to foreclosure, followed by her job of more than nine years a few months later. Her estranged husband, the father of her children, died two years ago.

Kathy and Troy Ersfeld, of Apple Valley, were each laid off from their jobs just months apart. Scraping by on unemployment compensation, the couple is contemplating putting down the ailing pet dog of their 5-year-old autistic son because they cannot afford exploratory surgery that could save the animal's life.

But, at least once monthly, each family gets a helping hand that literally puts food on their tables.

Kurschner, who returned to college while looking for a new job, volunteers for and is also a client of the food shelf that operates out of Neighborhood House, a social service agency on St. Paul's West Side.

Troy Ersfeld overcame the misplaced stigma many financially strapped families feel and walked into a food shelf in Rosemount for the first time in his adult life last week.

"Yes, I was embarrassed," Ersfeld said of his trip to the Rosemount Resource Center on Thursday. "But I almost cried walking out of there. I went back in and thanked the people because a big weight had been lifted off my shoulder. Without them (food shelves), I believe a lot of people would go hungry."

Metro-area food shelves and food banks are experiencing an increase in volume while facing the challenge of keeping the shelves stocked to meet rising demand. The rise has been fueled in large part by increased unemployment and the economic downsizing that has cut salaries and hours and made it more difficult for working-poor and lower-middle-class families like the Kurschners and the Ersfelds to make ends meet.

'IT MIGHT BE US THE NEXT TIME'

According to the nonprofit Hunger Solutions Minnesota, one in 17 Minnesotans relies on local food shelves. Last year, there were 2 million visits and 23,500 tons of food distributed at Minnesota's 300 food shelves. Food shelf staffers report that visits have doubled and even tripled in the past year.

Nationally, an estimated 36.3 million people live in households experiencing hunger or what is described as "food insecurity without hunger."

The nonprofit explains that this way: "For economic reasons, parents are skipping meals so that children have enough to eat, or the family is only getting enough food into the house by using emergency food sources, or the family cannot afford an adequate, healthy diet meeting basic nutritional standards."

The global picture is even more dire. A United Nations agency reported Friday that 1 billion people — one-sixth of the world's population — are now classified as hungry. The agency cited the global economic crisis and higher food prices as reasons that 100 million people joined the ranks of the hungry — people who consume fewer than 1,800 calories a day.

"I think (going to a food bank) is new for a lot of people, and we've worked hard to make sure that the process is handled in a dignified manner," said Megan Doyle, co-founder and director of Hope for the City. The nonprofit distributes food to more than 80 food shelves and soup kitchens within the nine-county metro area.

"None of us know if it might be us the next time," added Doyle, whose nonprofit received a 44-ton food donation recently from food distributor Nash Finch Co. "Americans have a preconceived notion of who needs help and often don't think that it may just be the person sitting next to you at church or behind you at the grocery store checkout line."

'I NEVER GIVE UP'

Kurschner, 38, an enrolled member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, was making decent money — \$49,000 a year — as director-manager of the band's Twin Cities welfare office when she was suddenly let go a few months ago.

She could not work out a deal with the mortgage bank and moved into a partially subsidized St. Paul apartment complex with four of her youngest children. Then came the job loss. She holds an associate's degree in human resources and has gone back to college to obtain a four-year degree in the same discipline.

She has tapped into several job sites but has yet to land a job. I caught her, along with her 10-year-old daughter, stocking donated Girl Scout cookies on the shelves at Neighborhood House last week. She volunteers once a week at the food shelf.

"Look, I never give up," Kurschner said. "I'll find a way back. I try to empower other families not to be down on themselves in hard times."

Cindy Vang, Neighborhood House's basic-needs program manager, said the volume of families using the food shelf has gone up 12 percent this year compared with the same period last year. The food shelf distributed more than 277 tons of food and recorded 7,500 visits by families last year.

Vang also confirms that more and more lower-middle-class families are showing up; she believes many more do not but should because they resist reaching out for help.

'THIS HELPS US SO MUCH'

Kathy Ersfeld, 37, was laid off from a sign company March 19 — the same day her son, Trevor, turned 5. Troy Ersfeld, 39, lost his job at a printing shop in Northfield on May 1. He was among those reluctant to reach out to a food shelf until he had a surprising chat with his mother.

"I never knew this, but she told me that when I was a boy, she relied on a food bank when times got hard — things like powdered milk and cheese," Ersfeld said. "When you are a child, I guess you think things just come, that it's just there."

He sounded like a kid at a toy store after he came back from the Rosemount food shelf.

"It felt like Christmas morning," he said of the three grocery bags full of canned vegetables, meats and pasta he brought home.

"This helps us so much," he said. "And there are a lot of other families hurting out there."

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