

clockwise: Lunchtime at the Haiti Outreach Ministries School; Lee Warren, Virginia director for Stop Hunger Now, with boxes of meals for Haiti packaged by students at East Carolina University during the August 2008 Million Meal Event; Roger Loyd, director, Divinity School Library, packages meals for Operation Sharehouse with fellow volunteers; Lee Warren reading to children after lunch at Haiti Outreach Ministries School.

Meeting the World's Hunger with *'Deep Gladness'*

"GO NOT TO THOSE WHO NEED YOU, BUT TO THOSE WHO NEED YOU THE MOST." — JOHN WESLEY

BY **DEBBIE SELINSKY**

For Lee Warren D'04, the search for the intersection of what theologian Frederick Buechner calls each person's "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger" often seemed circuitous.

Yet if the path leading to her current work as Virginia director for Stop Hunger Now took a few unexpected turns, she says it was worth it. Warren is just where she wants to be — helping satisfy hunger both physical and spiritual.

"We're all starving for something," says the former high school French teacher who was an empty-nester when she began to commute from her home in South Hill, Va., to Duke to pursue her master of divinity degree. "A lot of us are starving to give; sometimes people just need to be shown where and how they can do it."

Warren, who believes that caring for "the least of these" is a moral imperative that transforms the lives of both recipient and giver, brings a lifelong interest in other countries and cultures to Stop Hunger Now's commitment to ending global hunger.



Stop Hunger Now does that by bringing together givers from colleges, churches, and civic organizations. But donor involvement doesn't end there. In addition to writing a check, donors are encouraged to take an active role by helping package meals and supplies that are stocked in a network of Operation Sharehouses in Virginia and North Carolina.

"I had been focusing on spiritual transformation, and I found that if I listened very carefully to who I am and what I am created to do and be, God calls me to what theologian Frederick Buechner describes as 'the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,'" Warren says. "That's the way I work with God. I seek the 'deep gladness' that uses all my strengths, makes my cylinders run, and feeds my soul. When we're really fed, we do our best work."

Warren recalls asking God: "What am I meant to do to help serve the world's hunger?"

She was leading spiritual retreats and thinking about further ministry. "But I couldn't become an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church because you have to be able to move wherever you're appointed," Warren says. "My husband (Charles H. Warren, a general district judge for Mecklenburg and Lunenburg counties in Virginia) has to live within the county, so that wasn't an option."

Warren longed to pursue her love for theological study and decided to earn a degree at Duke Divinity School. With her husband's enthusiastic support, she spent four years commuting to Durham, where she spent much of the week before returning home on weekends. Sometimes she shared a hotel room with fellow women commuters; other times she rented a room in the home of a UMC clergy's widow. She



"To provide food and lifesaving aid to the world's most destitute and hungry in the most efficient, effective and sustainable manner."

STOP HUNGER NOW MISSION STATEMENT

served three of those years as a student pastor, juggling her studies with pastoral duties.

Those were "four of the happiest years of my life," says Warren, a magna cum laude graduate who is as fit as she is energetic. She teaches yoga and Pilates, and is eagerly anticipating the arrival of her first grandchild in August.

At Duke, she especially enjoyed her Old Testament classes and was influenced by the life and teachings of Peter Storey, Williams professor emeritus of the practice of Christian ministry, and a former bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

When she introduced Storey at the Virginia Annual Conference's banquet for the Methodist Federation for Social Justice, Warren remembered his response to a personal question she had asked him about tithing.

"Lee, it's not about how much you give," said Storey, who served as chaplain to Nelson Mandela during his imprisonment at Robben Island. "It's about how much you keep."

Those words continue to "challenge and haunt" her, she says.

When Warren accepted the position of Virginia director for Stop Hunger Now in 2006, she felt she'd arrived where she had been called. She has known founder and president Ray Buchanan since he visited her church 25 years ago in support of the Society of St. Andrew, a domestic hunger program he co-founded in Virginia.

"Lee was always interested in leading her congregations to a deeper understanding of hunger," Buchanan says. When she joined Stop Hunger Now, she "grabbed hold of the challenge and in less than three years has re-established and re-energized our efforts in Virginia in a phenomenal way."

Now celebrating its 10th anniversary, Stop Hunger Now gives people a hands-on experience in global ministry. Warren and other organizers set up an assembly line with huge bags of ingredients, including a chicken-flavored rice-soy mixture fortified with 21 essential vitamins and minerals. Wearing baseball caps or hairnets and plastic gloves, volunteers typically package 10,000 of the high-protein meals, each of which costs Stop Hunger Now just 25 cents.

In August 2008, 4,000 college students packaged 1 million meals in one day on the campuses of UNC-Chapel Hill, N.C. State, and East Carolina with help from nine other colleges and universities across the state.

"We called it the University Million Meals Event," says Warren, "and we'll be doing it again next August."

Since June 2006, when donors provided Warren's office, a warehouse, and a panel truck, she has traveled throughout her home state to get the word out about Stop Hunger Now. In early May, a new Richmond Sharehouse replaced the smaller South Hill location, joining sites in Lynchburg and Norfolk.

The success of the program shows that giving is “not all about writing a check,” she says. During a Sunday in March, more than 250 northern Virginians gathered between worship services and packaged 50,000 meals at church.

These meals are shipped primarily to schools in developing countries.

“This is the United Nations’ best strategy for alleviating poverty,” Warren says. “We’ve learned that when we set up school feeding programs, enrollment doubles and GPAs increase. It makes sense, because obviously, children can’t learn, nor do they attend school, when they’re hungry.”

Stop Hunger Now was on the ground for the 2007 earthquake in Peru, she adds, and on the ground one week ahead of the two most recent major hurricanes in Haiti. It also sends

meals to Africa and Central America, and in 2009 will open Sharehouses in Mississippi, Arizona, and South Africa. The organization has received a \$100,000 grant for its work with rural churches from The Duke Endowment.

When people ask about serving the hungry in the United States, Warren replies that no organization can successfully be all things to all people.

“We’re focused on those overseas who need help most urgently,” Warren says. The rice-based meals Stop Hunger Now offers are welcomed in Haiti, where she has been several times in the past year, and other developing countries, but might not be in this country.

She believes that the global economic crisis is making Americans “even more alert and aware” of the reality of global starvation.

“People want to give — they’re inherently starving to give, especially in churches, and especially among small rural congregations where there are limited opportunities to participate in hands-on mission,” Warren says.

“People of all denominations are seeing what a transformative experience this work is.”

DEBBIE SELINSKY is a freelance writer based in Durham.

MORE INFO

For more about Stop Hunger Now, visit www.stophungernow.org



JOHN GORDON/UMMS

“What a valuable and life giving work you are doing in helping with feeding so many children in the world, especially in Haiti. One high school student who was very sick three months ago started to receive a portion of food from us (three bags of rice and a bottle of oil) twice a week. The first week he gained one pound; now he weighs 14 pounds more. This progress is due to the rice that contains vitamins that Stop Hunger shipped to Haiti. His dad died some years ago and his mom is raising seven children by herself. Truly the rice has saved his life.”

— Excerpted message to Lee Warren from

JACKY DORLEANS, Director, Haiti Outreach Ministries