

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a “compassion story of the month.” This is the twenty third. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

“Share Coolers” in our Schools: Better Learning, Healthier Planet

By Sheila Humphreys

“At the end of the day I can take more food because we don't have enough food at home to eat when I'm hungry.” From a student at Academy School.

When Brattleboro Town Food Service Director Ali West of Fresh Picks - a division of Cafe Services, shared this quote with me on a grey day in April, she started to tear up. Ali is passionate about food, and she is even more passionate about feeding children in our community. She says, “we have such a need here in this community for nourishing meals for our young people,” and she's right.

Currently, 1 in 6 children in Windham County is living with food insecurity, and Ali and her team at Academy, Green Street, and Oak Grove Schools are using an innovative solution to combat hunger, the share cooler! These share coolers are centrally located in each school, and students can stop by during the day or at the end of the day on their way home to help themselves to nutritious food.

The coolers are stocked daily with healthy, fresh breakfast and lunch options including yogurt, peanut butter sandwiches, soups, salads, and fruit. The food in the coolers is excess or leftover food from previous meals that would otherwise go to waste. Ali says there is never anything left in the coolers at the end of the day. Share coolers dramatically reduce both hunger and food waste at all 3 schools, and they are open to all students, thereby reducing the stigma that sometimes accompanies food insecurity. In fact, just a few days ago a student asked Ali if he could take home a container of her homemade broccoli cheddar soup because, “my mom would love this!”

There are strict federal guidelines that school food services have to follow regarding meal portions, so kids from kindergarten through 6th grade are served the same size portions for school meals. Ali has noticed, not surprisingly, that some older students are still hungry after they've eaten their meal, while younger students sometimes leave food untouched on their trays. The share coolers allow these younger students to put unopened items aside for others to eat, thus meeting the needs of older kids and

eliminating the waste which otherwise would occur. Ali piloted the share cooler concept at Academy School, and then with support from Food Connects, a local non-profit supporting farm to school efforts in southern Vermont, a share cooler was installed at Oak Grove school. The third elementary school in the district, Green Street School, already had its own system in place with each classroom having a small refrigerator for this purpose.

This is a system that's both good for the students and good for the planet. In the US, an unbelievable 40% of food produced is wasted, and food waste currently makes up 20% of landfill weight. Methane produced by food waste is a greenhouse gas that is 21 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. These share coolers popping up in our schools offer a wonderful step in the right direction.

In closing, here's one more quote from one of Ali's students, "If you aren't hungry at lunch you can have another snack. It helps me focus!" Bravo to Ali and her team for helping children in our community get enough to eat, stay focused on their learning... and then be able to feel good about helping the planet.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.