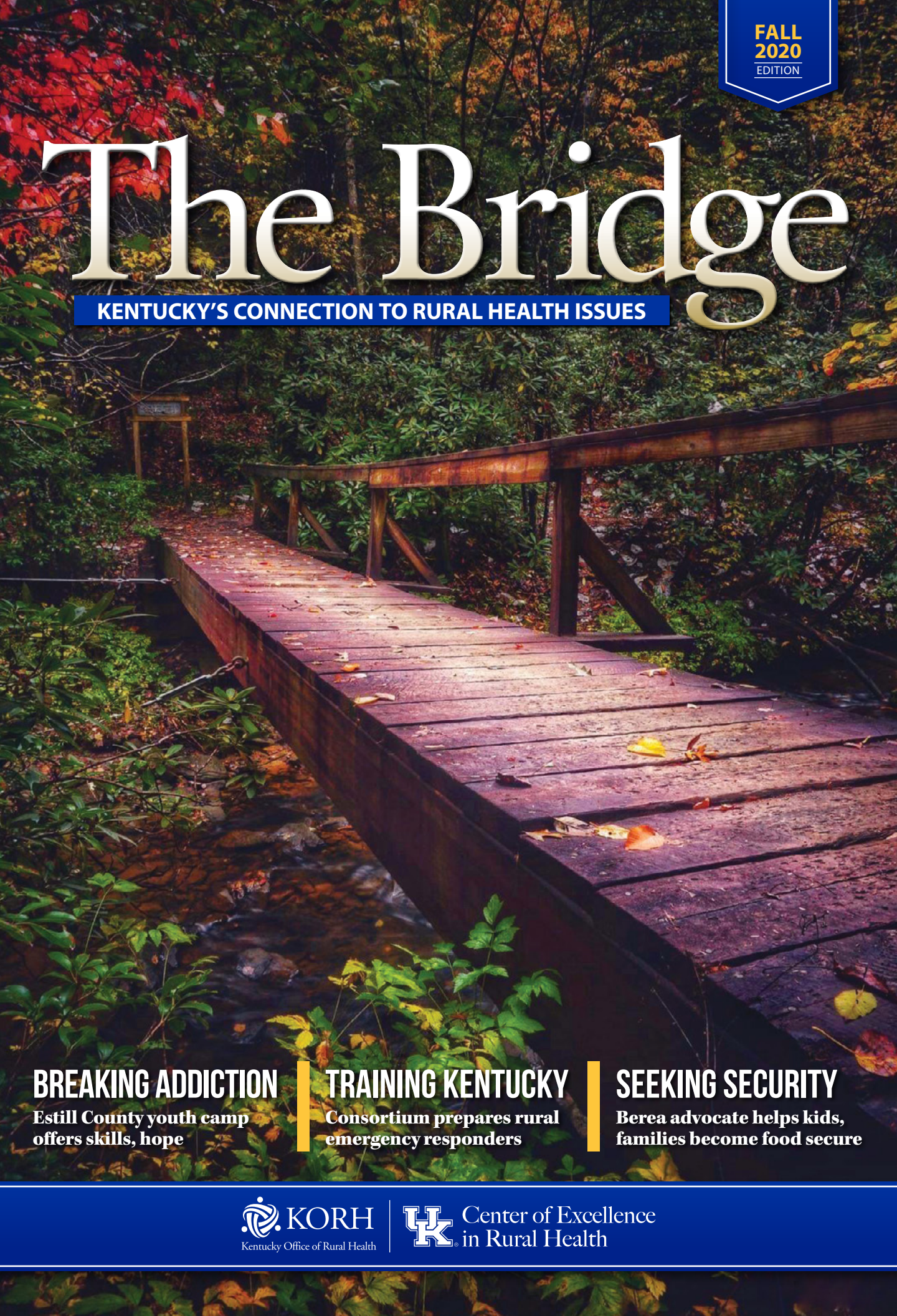

FALL 2020 EDITION

The Bridge

KENTUCKY'S CONNECTION TO RURAL HEALTH ISSUES

BREAKING ADDICTION
Estill County youth camp offers skills, hope

TRAINING KENTUCKY
Consortium prepares rural emergency responders

SEEKING SECURITY
Berea advocate helps kids, families become food secure

KORH Kentucky Office of Rural Health | Center of Excellence in Rural Health

A WORD FROM

Ernie L. Scott

DIRECTOR, KENTUCKY OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

REMEMBERING TO ALWAYS BE *thankful*

If we've learned nothing else since March, I hope that we've been reminded about gratitude and the importance of acknowledging all that's good in our lives.

There's no arguing with the fact that the pandemic has interrupted our daily existence and caused so much loss, sadness and stress. The constant headlines. Those who have been afflicted by the virus. The sheer uncertainty of it all.

And yet, we still have so much in our personal and professional lives — both big and little — to be thankful for. Taking some time to reflect on the goodness in our lives and offer thanks — in a text message, in a phone call, in prayer or meditation — can ignite a spark in us and refuel us. (And, gratitude is, in fact, good for our health: Studies show that, among other things, practicing gratitude can improve our immune system, lower our risk for mental health issues, reduce our levels of stress and help us get better sleep.)

A list of what we're grateful for might include: Our family. Our friends. Our jobs. Food on the table. A roof over our head. Access to running water. The ability to worship as we choose.

There's also: Electricity. Access to medical care and medication. Being able to soak up the beauty of Kentucky's countryside each morning and evening. Forgiving others and being forgiven. Taking long drives with no particular destination in mind.

And: The generosity of strangers. Having time to exercise. The ability to dream. Connecting to others — no matter where they are geographically — with the click of a button. Being surrounded by caring and passionate co-workers. Learning something new each day.

In my own life, the last few months have reminded me about the importance of family. My wife, daughter and I have always been close, but we're now sitting down together for more family meals. We're talking more. And, we've spent time together outdoors, exploring the many wonders that are located right in our own backyard. I cherish these moments.

At the community level, too, we have so much to be thankful for.

The dedicated public servants who are committed — now more than ever — to ensuring that our towns and cities survive and thrive.

The clinicians — often underpaid, nearly always overworked — who treat us like family and provide the same quality of care you'd find in any big city.

The nonprofits that work to fill gaps in food, counseling, social services, medical care and more.

The individual community members who step up to take the lead on solving the challenges that can only begin to be addressed at the local level.

In this issue of *The Bridge*, we highlight a number of the programs and individuals who are also deserving of our thanks:

- The Camp Mariposa site, operating in Estill County, which is part of a national effort to share tools and coping skills with young people who have been impacted by substance use disorders in their families. The hope is that, once trained with these tools, camp participants will be able to break the cycle of addiction.
- The Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium, based in Somerset, which offers free training to rural first responders in Kentucky and across the country. The consortium has now trained more than 100,000 students since its creation in 2005.
- Martina Leforce, a community advocate in Berea who has worked tirelessly — in both unpaid and paid roles — to ensure that children in her city don't go hungry. And, beyond just meeting the immediate food needs of kids, she's worked to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to grow their own food, preserve it and market it.

In the midst of a pandemic, it's easy to get caught up in discussions of herd immunity, vaccine development and the like. But it's also easy — so very easy — for each one of us to take a few moments and open our eyes a little wider. Once we do so, we're likely to see the Camp Mariposas and Martina Leforces that operate in our own communities, in our own regions. We'll see all that we have.

And when we do that, we'll be reminded of the fact that we have *so* very much to be grateful for. ▪

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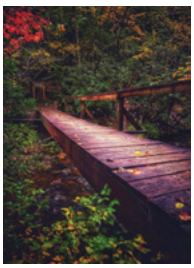
Photographer | Ron Jent



A pedestrian bridge along the Sheltowee Trace National Recreation Trail, in Whitley County, Kentucky. The trail, established in 1979, stretches the entirety of the Daniel Boone National Forest — across 21 counties throughout east-central Kentucky.

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To receive **The Bridge** electronically, visit http://thebridge.kyruralhealth.org

The Bridge is published on a quarterly basis through a joint effort of the UK Center of Excellence in Rural Health and the Kentucky Office of Rural Health. The magazine highlights best practices and innovative solutions to rural health challenges in the Commonwealth. This edition is funded in part by federal Health Resources and Services Administration Primary Care Office grant funds.

The UK Center of Excellence in Rural Health was established in 1990 to address health disparities in rural Kentucky, including a chronic shortage of health professionals and residents' poor health status. The Center accomplishes this through health professionals' education, health policy research, health care service and community engagement. The Center serves as the federally-designated Kentucky Office of Rural Health.

The Kentucky Office of Rural Health (KORH), established in 1991, is a federal-state partnership authorized by federal legislation. The mission of the KORH is to support the health and well-being of Kentuckians by promoting access to rural health services. The KORH assists clinicians, administrators and consumers find ways to improve communications, finances and access to quality health care while ensuring that funding agencies and policymakers are made aware of the needs of rural communities. The KORH receives support from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Estill County camp offers hope for youth impacted by substance abuse

By Jackie Hollenkamp Bentley

Editor's Note: *To protect the identity of the parent who was interviewed for this story, her name and her son's name have been changed.*

Teresa first heard about Camp Mariposa more than two years ago while the Eastern Kentucky woman was in outpatient treatment for substance use disorder.

She knew at once that she wanted to send her son, Jonathan, there to keep him from going down the same, treacherous path both she and Jonathan's father went down.

He "grew up around [drug abuse], stupid stuff," Teresa said of her son. "His dad is still in the pen because of the stuff that he was doing when on drugs."

Teresa also served jail time for drug-related crimes, leaving Jonathan without a mother until 2018. That's when she vowed to turn her life around.

Jonathan also lost a family member to an overdose. Teresa remembers telling him, "Look, … that could have been your mommy. It's bad stuff."

So she didn't hesitate to send Jonathan, then 11, to the Estill County camp, while she was still recovering from the ravages of substance abuse. For the past two years, Jonathan has attended the weekend-long camp where he's met new friends, gained mentors and learned that he isn't alone.

"He can get off his chest the things that he's been through," Teresa said. "Plus, he gets to be around other kids, too, and learn about them and their lives."

Briana Gilford, the director of the Estill County camp location, said that's exactly what they hope campers experience when they attend the bi-monthly camp sessions.

"The way I see it, it gives them an opportunity to learn coping skills in their lives," Gilford said. "It gives them that sense that they're not alone to interact with kids like them, as well as seeing adults that are reliable and good people. It's really important for them."

Knowledge, Tools and Coping Skills

Camp Mariposa is a national program sponsored by the Philadelphia-based Eluna Network, a nonprofit which aims to support children and families devastated by addiction or grief. The camp program was created to address the needs of younger victims of substance use disorders — the children of those addicted to drugs or alcohol.

More than 1,300 children from across the country, ages 9-12, have taken advantage of Camp Mariposa. And, of Eluna's 13 camp locations across the country, the Estill County site is the only one in Kentucky. Since it's opening in March 2018, Kentucky's Camp Mariposa site has seen more than three dozen different children from Estill County and surrounding counties participate.

Camp sessions are held one weekend a month, every other month, giving participants six months of access to the knowledge, tools and coping skills that can help prevent them from developing an addiction of their own and, at the same time, providing them a new chance at life by helping to break the intergenerational cycle of addiction. Each camper attends free of charge, thanks, in part, to a $2.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Brian Maus, the director of Eluna's Addiction Prevention and Mentoring Programs, said studies have shown that the children that Camp Mariposa seeks to assist have a higher chance of using drugs and committing crimes by the age of 14.

Maus said their objective is to reach that at-risk population and greatly reduce those odds. He said there are plenty of obstacles to overcome, particularly with youth living in challenging situations that involve more than just substance use.

"About three-quarters of the kids have a family history of mental health issues, and about a third of our kids are in some kind of counseling themselves," Maus said. "About half the kids have experienced abuse or

Camp sessions at Kentucky's Camp Mariposa site are held one weekend a month, every other month. Alongside traditional camp activities, participants are exposed to tools and coping skills that can help them to avoid developing a substance use disorder.

neglect, and about a third of the kids have experienced multiple types of abuse or neglect."

Maus said these children come into the program with profound feelings of guilt, believing that their family member's substance use is somehow their fault.

"They think that if they didn't fight with their sibling or if they just sat down and did their homework, their parent wouldn't be using the substance," Maus said. "[We want to break] the rules of 'don't talk, don't trust, don't feel.' What the program tries to do is create a safe, trusting community. Give the kids the words to express themselves and how they're feeling."

The camp uses the Eluna approach called the 7 Cs:

- I didn't ***cause*** it.
- I can't ***control*** it.
- I can't ***cure*** it.

But

- I can take ***care*** of myself
- by ***communicating*** my feelings,
- making good ***choices*** and
- ***celebrating*** myself.

Eluna partners with WestCare Tennessee — a nonprofit that offers a range of behavioral health and human services programs for substance use and mental health disorders, homelessness, domestic violence, prisoner re-entry and HIV/AIDS — to run the Eastern Kentucky program. Camp Burnamwood in Irvine plays host to the camp, offering its 300-plus acres for the campers to hike, swim, canoe and so much more.

"We just have a lot of fun," said Renee Salyers, WestCare's regional administrator. "We provide a safe environment to help break the cycle of addiction. That's our main goal."

Education and Support Exercises

Alongside traditional camp activities, mental health experts and drug prevention specialists lead education and support exercises.

One exercise, "Painting the Brain," asks campers to draw a human brain — where one half shows what a brain on drugs looks like and the other half shows what a healthy brain looks like.

For another exercise, campers create "vision boards" where they map out their dreams and see that they can accomplish their goals.

Campers are also asked to write a letter to addiction — allowing them a chance to express their anger.

Dear Alcoholism and Drugs,

Why did you pick my family? Why won't you let go of my dad. My dad will probably die because of you! He has already lost his drivers [sic] license from drunk driving. He can't come to see me unless he is lucky enough to get a ride. I can't live with my mom because of you! I hardly get to see my parents. I can't even call my mom because she can't afford a phone. I hate you!

Signed,

A VERY ANGRY Kid

"Just them being able to express themselves and talk about it, I think, is a coping skill in itself, just getting

Campers make friends, learn to take better care of themselves and develop a more positive outlook on life.

An annual trip to the Great American Ballpark in Cincinnati and other outings provide campers and their family members with quality time together.

them to open up," Gilford said. "A lot of them, when they first come to camp, are very closed up and do not want to show their feelings."

Salyers said they also bring in representatives from police and fire departments, and EMS, in an effort to help build a rapport between campers and the first responders. The intent is to show campers that first responders are there to help them.

"So many of those children have negative connotations of those first responders because they've taken their parents out of their home or they've just had bad experiences with them," she said.

Mentors, including those who previously participated in the camp and "graduated," are also at every session — to provide campers with a familiar face every time they attend.

"The mentors are there to listen to them," Salyers said. "They're there to have fun with them. They just give so much attention to them because they are with them the entire camp and giving them the stability of seeing the same people six times a year."

Quality Time with Family Members

Throughout the year, Camp Mariposa also provides opportunities for campers and their families to spend some quality time together.

Teresa is grateful for those chances to make special memories with her son.

"We went bowling and that's one thing I've never done and I'm 43," she said. "It's a cool thing they do for us."

Salyers said the highlight of the year is a trip to a Cincinnati Reds ballgame at the Great American Ballpark.

"It gives me cold chills [to remember] because when we were on the bus and we went over the hill to Cincinnati, they saw this huge city with skyscrapers, and their mouths just dropped," Salyers said. "They've also never been inside a ball field like that. It's just incredible to see their little eyes and emotions, just to see something that they have never seen before."

Salyers said those daylong events give campers a much-needed break from their day-to-day lives and provides continued interaction with peers who are going through similar experiences.

"They don't open up the first time, but the more that they share with each other, the more they realize that, 'You know, I'm not out here by myself. This child is going through the same thing I'm going through,'" she said.

Whole Life Ahead

For Teresa and her son, Camp Mariposa provides lasting memories, while showing her son that he has his whole life ahead of him and he has the power to accomplish his dreams.

"He sees, too, the road that I was on, and the road I'm on now. It's a big difference," she said. "When you do good, good things happen." ▪

Jackie Hollenkamp Bentley is a Louisville-based freelance writer who covers all things Kentucky.

Training Kentucky and the Nation

Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium equips first responders with needed knowledge, skills

By Katheran Wasson

Greg Gould traveled to a rural town in the Pacific Northwest around the first of the year to teach a course on isolation and quarantine to first responders — something that, at the time, was just another day on the job for the longtime instructor.

A few weeks later, that course became incredibly relevant, as the first COVID-19 case in the United States was confirmed in Washington. It was an unfortunate but important reminder that, particularly when it comes to first responders, training has a real and significant impact.

Gould is an instructor with the Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium (RDPC), which has provided free training for rural first responders since 2005. Funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the consortium's courses are offered to jurisdictions with populations of 50,000 or less as well as to tribal communities, with the overall goal of helping first responders in those communities — which often have limited budgets — to better respond to emergencies and disasters.

The consortium serves first responders nationwide, but it has roots in Kentucky. The Center for Rural Development, based in Somerset, serves as the executive agent for the RDPC, and Eastern Kentucky University, in Richmond, is a member.

The RDPC has trained more than 100,000 students in its history, including nearly 4,000 in Kentucky — no small feat for an organization focused on providing training to emergency responders working in the country's small towns and communities. The consortium now trains more than 8,000 people a year in all 50 states and five U.S. territories.

Attendees include those working in health care, emergency medical services and public health, but also areas beyond health, such as law enforcement, education, public works and other branches of government. The consortium takes a "whole community approach" to its training offerings and works to understand and meet the needs of rural America.

"There is a misconception that emergency response is easier and simpler in rural areas, but that's so far from reality," said Gould, who specializes in teaching public health and safety courses when he's not working as a first responder himself. "In rural areas, you have a limited number of providers and those providers have to be well-versed in so many different things."

Rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to emergency preparation and response. Limited public funding can create challenges in staffing, equipment and other resources. Plus, many rural first responders are volunteers or have other jobs.

Gould likened it to "having brain surgery as a hobby."

"You have to have all the PPE (personal protective equipment), you have to understand it and be able to work these mechanisms — and then you still have to go to your regular job," he said. "Responders in rural areas have to be jacks of all trades to keep their communities safe."

HOW IT WORKS

Health-related training is just part of the RDPC's range of course offerings. Other courses cover responding to mass fatalities, disaster recovery, port and vessel security, school safety, emergency operations and more. In all, there are 23 instructor-led courses and five web-based courses.

The consortium's academic members — which include, in addition to EKU, North Carolina Central University in Durham; the University of Findlay in

Findlay, Ohio; the University of California, Davis; Northwest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville, Arkansas; and, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, an affiliate member — develop and deliver the training on behalf of RDPC.

"It really is a collective of a number of people, a lot of people that they are in it for the right reason," Gould said. "All of these people are just dedicated and passionate about what they do, and so it's just not another program on campus — this has real, dramatic and applicable impact to people's safety around the U.S."

Each member brings its own niche to the table, according to RDPC Director Julie Wilson. For example, UC Davis has an agroterrorism food safety program, and the University of Tennessee has expertise in tribal training.

But the COVID-19 pandemic brought in-person training to a screeching halt, Wilson said. The consortium quickly began adapting its courses to virtual delivery, with instructors teaching live via webcam to first responders who remained in their home communities. What were traditionally one-day, 8-hour courses held in a conference room are now broken up into two, four-hour sessions, with most participants joining from their home computers.

Wilson said the consortium wanted to maintain the interaction present in instructor-led courses and selected this approach over self-directed online courses.

"A lot of people prefer the virtual format over the (self-directed) web based [courses], because you still get the interaction with classmates, and the instructors use polls and breakout rooms for participants," Wilson said. "It's a great tool from what we've seen so far, and we're looking to move forward to develop more."

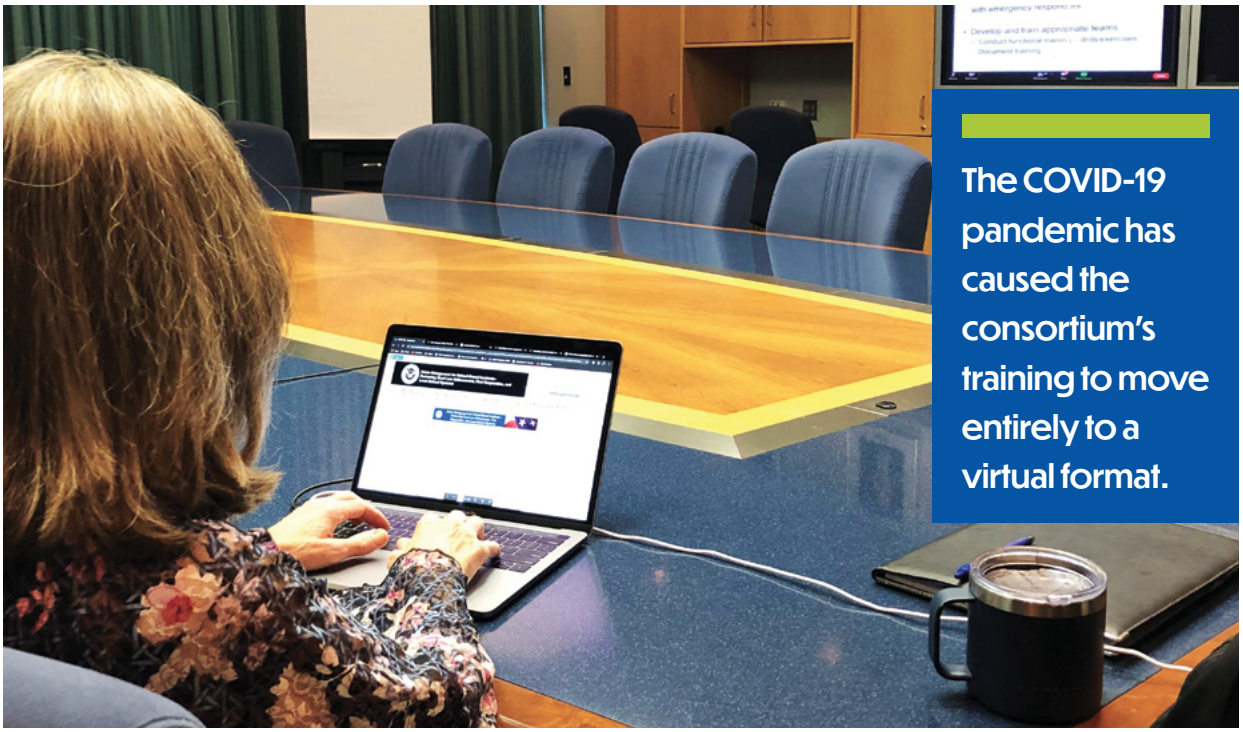
The shift to online education is something the RDPC was already planning for, but the pandemic has accelerated those plans.

"I do think it will affect the way we do things going forward, and, if nothing else, it will give us a different modality of instruction," Wilson said.

Gould said he's adapting to teaching online, but some topics remain challenging —like teaching first responders to properly dress in PPE. During face-to-face sessions, students can actually try on the equipment to see how it feels and get assistance from instructors if needed.

Ultimately, he thinks after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, a hybrid model could offer students the greatest benefit. For example, students could complete basic pre-work online and then join together for a shorter in-person session for practical exercises.

The Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium – based at The Center for Rural Development in Somerset, in Pulaski County – has provided free training to rural first responders since 2005. The consortium's academic members – six universities across the country, including Eastern Kentucky University – develop and deliver the training.



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the consortium's training to move entirely to a virtual format.

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Amy Tomlinson, public health preparedness manager at the Lake Cumberland District Health Department, has taken several courses through the RDPC. In particular, she remembers a training designed for public information officers.

Despite more than a decade of experience in public information, she walked away from the course with new information she uses on the job today.

"Anytime you take a course, you learn new things," she said. "The instructor was a retired Kentucky state trooper who had done public affairs, and that was a whole different perspective to hear. It was very valuable information — I use it a lot."

The course attracted a mix of experienced veterans and new professionals, which she thought was valuable to both. Additionally, it drew attendees from all over the Commonwealth — staff from fire departments, hospitals and health departments.

She appreciates the rural focus of RDPC courses and said the consortium has even worked with her health department to offer trainings outside their typical course catalog.

"I think it's always important to tailor things to the area where you're living and working," she said. "No training can be everything to everybody, but they are able to tailor them a bit more to Appalachia and rural Kentucky."

Because she's been busy helping with her community's COVID-19 response, Tomlinson hasn't had time for training in recent months, so she hasn't taken advantage of the RDPC's new online courses. But she said she may in the future and said expanded online options would be helpful to Kentucky's rural responders.

"I think it's a very valuable resource to have for our population," she said. "The facilities and the organizations that can take advantage of these types of trainings, I think it's a great resource and tool."

Tomlinson said she's optimistic for the opportunity online courses would bring to first responders who may not otherwise have access. Although RDPC trainings are free to all participants, travel and lodging costs can make it prohibitive for some. She did note the unique benefits of in-person trainings, such as networking, group projects and, particularly for her profession, public speaking practice. Like Gould, she said a hybrid approach could offer the best of both.

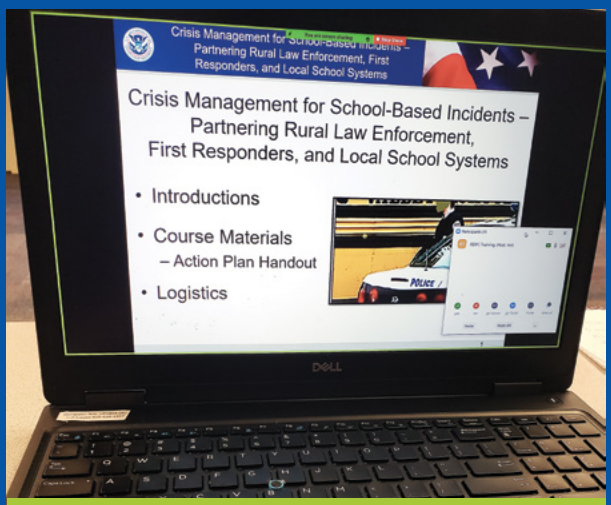
"I do think online trainings will be good because you don't have the barriers of time and travel," she said. "It's much more budget friendly for organizations to train their staff using an online model and with budget cuts and tightening belts, it's going to be a great option." ▪

Katheran Wasson is a Northern Kentucky-based writer and editor who covers business, health, agriculture and life in Kentucky.

How to Request Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium Training

Individuals and organizations throughout Kentucky — and across the country — can request that instructor-led, face-to-face Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium (RDPC) courses be offered in their communities. (A list of web-based course offerings can be found at the consortium's website: www.ruraltraining.org.) Attendance at trainings is open to all. (The only prerequisite is that attendees are U.S. citizens. Foreign nationals can also attend with additional vetting).

A minimum of 20 pre-registered students 10 days in advance of the training date is required for a course to be held. Once approved, costs associated with the course are covered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Local jurisdictions, however, must provide the training space.



To request a course, complete the form at the RDPC website at:

www.ruraltraining.org/training/request/
or call 877-855-7372

In addition, the RDPC offers these tips to consider when planning a course:

- **Contact your state Homeland Security training office to notify them of your interest in RDPC training.** They can offer assistance in securing the training, they can share the experiences of others within the state who have hosted RDPC classes and they can provide information about possible scheduling conflicts in the region that may impact attendance. These offices can also help get the word out about the training to other communities.
- **Contact other agencies and organizations in your jurisdiction to determine their interest in the training.** Since much of RDPC training is tailored for multiple disciplines, individuals and organizations that request training sessions should contact a wide range of potential attendees in their region to determine their availability and interest, prior to requesting a class.
- **Determine potential date(s) for training and whether they conflict with other local or state events that might impact attendance.** Attendance at RDPC courses can be adversely affected by other trainings, meetings, exercises, conferences or events that occur on or near your selected dates. Be sure to check the calendar before scheduling.
- **Reach out to surrounding cities, towns, counties, parishes or tribal areas to determine their interest in joining your training efforts.** In order to meet the minimum seat requirement (usually 20 students), agencies in neighboring jurisdictions who may be called upon to offer (or need from you) mutual aid support during emergency response efforts should be contacted about the potential training opportunity. Also consider inviting representatives from community stakeholder groups, such as local chambers of commerce, volunteer organizations, private sector groups, school systems, local emergency planning committees and tribal officials. If your jurisdiction is in close proximity to a state border, consider inviting responders from the neighboring state(s) to attend.■

Free to Kids

Knox County pharmacy offers free multivitamins to children

By Michael McGill

It sounds like an offer that's almost too good to be true: free multivitamins.

But that's what the staff at the Knox Professional Pharmacy in Barbourville are handing out to Knox County children every month — a full month's supply of multivitamins, each month, for the year. All for free.

'A Good Service to Our Community'

The pharmacy's staff was approached about four years ago by their wholesaler and buying group with an offer they could hardly refuse: The pharmacy could participate in a program that allowed them to purchase multivitamins at a discounted rate in order to pass those vitamins on to children in their community, free of charge.

It's an out-of-pocket expense for the pharmacy, but it's worth it, says Frankie Abner, one of the pharmacy's co-owners. She and pharmacist Cory Smith purchased the business in 2017 from Abner's father, who started it more than 40 years ago.

"We just felt like it would be a good service to our community," she says. "We probably have a lot of children, especially in the summer, and now, where they're not actively attending school [due to the COVID-19 pandemic], who don't receive proper nutrition at home. It's kind of our way of contributing to the community to help with that problem."

Any child who resides in the county and is between the ages of four and 12 is eligible to participate, Abner says. The pharmacy has allowed children as young as two to receive the vitamins, as long as their parents believe they can properly chew and swallow them, she says.

'Most People are Really Pleased'

Since its inception, more than 100 children have enrolled in the program and have stopped by the pharmacy to pick up their vitamins during at least one month, Abner says.

She says participation does tend to fluctuate some — life gets busy for parents and kids, and during the summer months, especially, when parents aren't taking their kids to school on a daily basis, they may not remember to stop by the pharmacy.

"Normally, every year, we do back-to-school events at all of our local elementary schools and promote the program then," Abner says. "And we'll see a pretty large response for a few months after that. And then it kind of dies down until the next year."

The community's reaction to the free-vitamins-for-kids program has been positive.

"Most people are really pleased about the opportunity," Abner says.

And, for both Abner and Smith, any support they can provide to the county's kids is about more than dollars and cents — it's personal.

"Well I have school-age children and Cory does as well. Both of us are pretty passionate about doing many types of service in the community — especially if it involves children," she says. ▪

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CORPS

spotLIGHT

Meet Justin Smith

OUTPATIENT THERAPIST
PHOENIX PREFERRED CARE
Somerset, Kentucky

When did your service begin?
I began participating with the NHSC Loan Repayment Program in December 2018.

What are your job responsibilities at your NHSC practice site?
I am an outpatient therapist providing individual counseling to a number of clients in the Somerset/Lake Cumberland region. My caseload is primarily children and adolescents, many of whom have special needs — including Autism Spectrum Disorder. I do work with some adults and families as well. In addition to a number of administrative duties, including supervision and being a team leader, my responsibilities also include serving as the site point of contact for the NHSC Program for Phoenix Preferred Care.

How did you first learn about NHSC programs?
I first heard about the NHSC program in my graduate program as a way to obtain student loan repayment. I decided to learn more about the program and worked through the process to have our agency added as a service site.

What does it mean to you to be a NHSC participant?
Participating with NHSC means more than just having my student loans paid off —though that is a wonderful benefit. It includes a commitment to striving to bring access to needed quality mental health services to a historically underserved region of the country.

What is the most important lesson that you've learned so far during your NHSC service?
The lack of qualified mental health clinicians in Appalachia is staggering, but the need is vast. NHSC is helping to bridge that gap.

What advice would you offer to someone who is considering participation in NHSC programs?
Do it! Rotary International has as a motto, "Service above self" and I think that applies to what we do as NHSC participants as well. While there are certainly personal rewards for the participant, doing what we can to bring services to those who need them and have the most difficulty obtaining them is fulfilling a greater call to helping improve our small piece of the world. ▪

If you have participated in a National Health Service Corps program or know of someone who has, please let us know. We're looking for participants to feature in future issues of *The Bridge*.

Rural Health CHAMPION

ONE CHILD AT A TIME

Berea food security advocate works to fight hunger, increase access

By Michael McGill

When she was younger, Martina Leforce experienced food insecurity firsthand.

It was just one of a number of challenges that she and her family, then living in Illinois, faced.

They lived in substandard housing.

Leforce and her sister were latchkey kids.

Hers was a single-parent household and her mother worked long hours to make ends meet — at factories, making minimum wage.

The family didn't make enough money to get by, but made too much to qualify for state or federal assistance.

Leforce remembers visits to the local food bank. Waiting for the family's food stamps to arrive in the mail. And being on the receiving end of free meals at school. (She also remembers the stigma she felt as one of the kids who got those free meals.)

And, it's that family history — the lived experience of being food insecure — that has helped to propel Leforce on a mission to ensure that kids living in Berea, Kentucky, her new home, don't have to face the same food-related challenges she once felt. For the past five years she's worked tirelessly — dreaming, planning and executing — in both volunteer roles and paid positions, to meet not only the immediate hunger needs of children in her Central Kentucky community, but also to build greater food security.

"I feel like fighting hunger is a great first response," Leforce says. "Meeting meal gaps is a great place to be at … [but] we're going to be really hoping to influence the next generation of consumers and farmers and backyard growers and cooks and chefs. All these kids that we work with, that's really investing in our future."

'JUST PURE LUCK'

It all started with a garden. Or at least, the idea for a garden.

When Leforce's mother relocated to Berea a few years ago and then found herself caring for three granddaughters — after Leforce's sister, a nurse, became addicted to opioids — she was straining to get by.

She successfully moved into a low-income housing authority neighborhood in the community, but she still struggled to feed her granddaughters.

When Leforce would visit her mother and nieces, she'd often stop by and talk with neighbors too. What she learned in those conversations was that her mother wasn't alone: Many of the neighbors in the community had difficulties feeding their families as well.

Leforce also discovered during these conversations that

some neighbors had previously gardened. And, they were interested in growing their own food again. They talked about the possibilities of a backyard garden and a community orchard. But they didn't have the space or resources to get started.

So, she started digging, checking into the programs and organizations already operating in the community.

One day, she happened to be walking through downtown Berea when she spotted a sign for Grow Appalachia. Leforce had never heard of it before. Curious, she walked up to the organization's second-floor offices; introduced herself to David Cooke, the organization's founder and director; and shared her frustrations. She had an idea — to start a community garden to help her mother and her mother's neighbors — but she didn't really know how to proceed with it.

"I was just a mom and an aunt and a neighbor," she remembers thinking.

Grow Appalachia, a strategic initiative of Berea College, has, since 2009, partnered with individual families, communities and organizations throughout Central Appalachia to make healthy food accessible to all. The organization's work has included everything from making gardening grants available to nonprofits and installing commercial kitchens in rural communities to providing technical assistance to individual growers.

Cooke revealed that, just weeks earlier, the college's president had asked him to look into the possibility of running a service program to help feed kids locally.

The timing, as Leforce puts it, "was just pure luck." That chance meeting with Cooke launched the work she is still engaged in five years later.

First, she ended up applying for and securing funds from Grow Appalachia to build a garden.

That garden, now known as the Glades Community Garden, sits on property owned by a local church, but property that borders her mother's neighborhood. The church's leadership had been looking for ways to extend their reach to their closest neighbors, to

Martina Leforce

invest in the neighborhood. And those neighbors had been looking for growing space. It was a win-win that Leforce helped to broker.

The garden has grown to include dozens of raised beds, a high tunnel which allows the growing season to be extended and, most recently, an outdoor education center that provides space for kids to learn how to grow and prepare their own food, as well as learn more about ecological balance, and the preservation and protection of watersheds.

It's become a centerpiece of the neighborhood and the community: Families now grow their own food there. Children have their own place to gather, learn and grow. Some of the garden's bounty has regularly made its way to a local food bank. The public library, local schools and other nonprofits have held classes, workshops and camps in the space, and supported the actual construction of the garden. (That's really one of the calling cards of Leforce's work: She's a talented organizer with the uncanny ability to build relationships with others, to collaborate and seek cooperation — all in service of improving the health and well-being of area kids and their families.)

That initial meeting with Grow Appalachia's Cooke, though, also set in motion a simultaneous project — a larger project, whose impact would be felt throughout the entire Berea community.

'TO GET EVERY KID WHAT I THINK MY KID DESERVES'

Back in 2015, Leforce remembers that there was just one U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-sponsored Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meal site in Berea — at the local branch of the Madison County Public Library. SFSP, also known as the Summer Meals Program, provides free meals to school-age kids once schools let out for the year. It's a federally-funded and state-administered program.

Leforce reasoned, however, there was a need in Berea for additional meal sites: Berea was, as she describes it, "a pretty good-sized town" with a population of nearly 15,000. There were four neighborhoods that provided housing opportunities specifically to low-income residents. And, there was an 87 percent free lunch participation rate in the schools.

With the blessing of Grow Appalachia, she began — first as a volunteer, then in a part-time paid role — to develop the Berea Summer Food Service Program. As an SFSP sponsor, the program would be responsible for locating and recruiting eligible meal sites; hiring, training and supervising staff and volunteers; arranging for meals to be prepared or delivered; monitoring sites; preparing all of the paperwork to be reimbursed (programs are reimbursed for meals as well as administrative and operational costs); and, ensuring that the project would be sustainable through community partnerships, fundraising and volunteer recruitment.

Planning for the program's rollout took a full year — with Leforce in the lead role. (She was joined in the work by two AmeriCorps VISTA members: Alix Burke and Aja Croteau.) That preparation involved not only training and coordinating with the state's Summer Food Service Program agents in the Kentucky Department of Education, and forming partnerships with on- and off-campus organizations, but also planning meals with Sodexo, the college's food service vendor, which was contracted to prepare the food.

There was also a need to get out into the community to try to figure out just where meal sites — the actual locations where food and programming would be offered — should be located in order to reach the kids who needed it most.

Leforce rode the public buses. She biked. She walked. She took photos. She studied the images of Berea on Google Maps. She also reached out to community members who were in the know.

"I didn't have to reinvent anything," Leforce says. "You know, I've been living here for a while, but a family resource officer, for example, a coordinator who's been here for 30 years, is going to be the person I should call. And, you know, the big thing was just that people who had more experience in this community and really knew what the families needed, they were really open with me and really inviting and really mentored me along the way."

In its first year, in 2016, the Berea Summer Food Service Program — staffed mostly by volunteers and interns from Berea College — served more than 13,000 meals at 26 sites, everything from camps to churches, parks to neighborhood cul de sacs.

At six sites, the program also staged kid-friendly enrichment programming: games and read-alouds, as well as field trips to the college's greenhouse and aquaponics facility, and workshops on sustainability and recycling. (That programming has since expanded to focus more on hands-on skills: with kids learning how to produce their own food, cook their own food and, as Leforce puts it, "really take control of their food destinies.")

Leforce calls the program's first year "a mad dash scramble," but says it went well despite the mistakes that pop up when you start something new from the ground-up. In fact, making mistakes, she says, learning from them and making adjustments is how you move toward continuous improvement.

"I would not have said that it would have been a sustainable model that first year, just because the sheer amount of work it takes to get something going in the beginning, especially as someone who's coordinating something. But … we were able to get a little bit of research done, to figure out what worked and what didn't and we directly applied that to the next year," she says.

In subsequent years, the food service program — which changed its name to Berea Kids Eat in 2018, the same year that Leforce was hired on full time — served even more meals: more than 17,000 in 2017; and nearly 18,000 in 2018.

One of Leforce's dreams came true earlier this year when Berea Kids Eat, in partnership with Berea Community Schools, converted a retired school bus into a mobile meals classroom. The bus is expected to be used to provide neighborhoods with food, health screenings, academic support, access to technology and more. The project was made possible with funding from a Cigna Healthier Kids for Our Future grant.

Under Leforce's direction, the scope of Berea Kids Eat initiatives and programming has also grown.

In 2017, the program became a sponsor with the USDA's At-risk Afterschool Meal program, furnishing snacks to the local school system and public library — to be served at the after-school programming that was already being offered in those locations. Participating in the program meant that Berea Kids Eat was now providing food year-round to kids.

A year later, Berea Kids Eat started a summer weekend backpack meal program. Modeled after an existing program in operation in the public schools during the regular school year, the summer program tapped school family resource officers to identify young people who may need extra meals at home on weekends throughout the summer. Backpacks were filled with food provided by God's Outreach Madison County Food Bank, in nearby Richmond, and distributed on Fridays at Berea Kids Eat meal sites.

In 2019, with funding from the National Recreation and Parks Association, Berea Kids Eat established a Youth Farmers' Market at the site of the preexisting Berea Farmers' Market — where young growers can now sell their produce. That funding also supported expanded nutrition-related programming at Berea Kids Eat meal sites.

Support from a Cigna Healthier Kids for Our Future grant led to the creation of public gardens at park-based meal sites.

And, additional funding from Cigna has helped Berea Kids Eat, in partnership with Berea Community Schools, to, earlier this year, convert a retired school bus into a mobile meals classroom — a project that Leforce has dreamed about for years. It's expected to be used to provide neighborhoods with food, health screenings, academic support, access to technology and more.

Along the way, too, Glades Community Garden was also added to the constellation of Berea Kids Eat initiatives.

There's a clear philosophy that underpins Leforce's efforts: She's "just trying to get every kid what I think my kid deserves," she says.

'THE FIRST PLACE THAT EVER FELT LIKE HOME'

It almost seems like Leforce was *meant* to come to Berea.

She originally made her way to the Madison County community in 2003 — to attend college. Although she was viewed by some back home in Illinois as not being "college material," she was, in fact, a high-performing student. Her soccer coach and 4-H advisor, himself a graduate of a work college, encouraged her to apply to Berea College.

At the college, Leforce studied child and family studies, and women's and gender studies. Outside of the classroom, she tutored kids and had an on-campus labor position working at the college greenhouses and farms.

Looking back, she says her experiences at the college

transformed her eating habits and her understanding of food systems. She ate fresh blackberries for the first time. She traveled with classmates to Chiapas, Mexico and Nicaragua through the college's study abroad program and learned more about agriculture. And, after their return home, she joined some of those students in starting a co-op house on campus. The group worked out an arrangement to purchase their own food through the college's meal plan and prepare it themselves.

"It was my first experience … really being able to interact with a farm," she says of her time at the college. "I was surrounded by farms [back home] in Illinois, but it's all these big operations of pigs and soybeans and subsidy crops. And so coming down here … I could actually get my hands in it, which is pretty neat. It changes a lot for most people, I think, when they can do that."

After graduating, Leforce spent a number of years as a WWOOFer, a volunteer with World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, a network of organizations that link visitors with organic farmers in order to promote sustainable agriculture practices. WOOFers live alongside their farmer hosts, help with daily tasks and experience life as a farmer. She traveled to farms across the country, lived on them, and learned how to grow and prepare food — all in exchange for her labor.

She also spent time alongside migrant farm workers in different harvesting areas throughout the country — picking beets in South Dakota, apples and blueberries in Maine.

Those experiences helped her to "feel very connected to food and to the hands that go into growing it," she says. "And it really does build a respect [in one] for the food system."

Leforce ended up returning to Berea — which has since become her adopted home.

"Berea was just the first place that ever felt like home to me, which is probably why I am connected to doing this work here. Why I'm raising my child here. And I just bought a house here, which I never thought would be realistic," she says. "This became like my home."

'I CAN CREATE A SPACE'

Leforce's desire to help families become more food secure is more than just a job. She's drawn to the work for a number of reasons, most of them personal.

There's her own connection to food insecurity and going without.

She calls it a form of trauma that she suffered at a younger age. And, she says, while her sister may have dealt with that trauma through addiction, she's found another avenue: working to find solutions for others.

"I can't make that child's father stop drinking," she says. "But what I can do is, I can create a space where every day that that kid has this summer, they're going to come there [to a Berea Kids Eat site] and they're going to know that there's people that care about them and they're going to have an opportunity to create and they will have the ability to thrive."

She believes in people too.

"I guess I just believe in people, I do," she says. "I believe that people have strength and resiliency."

But, there's also, deep within Leforce, a desire to just do *something* to help solve the challenges faced by community members in her adopted home. It's part of who she is. It's in her DNA. And it's a drive that was likely strengthened during her years as a student at Berea College, where a primary lesson imprinted on graduates is the importance of engaging your community through service. (Aside from food security, Leforce has also spoken out in the community about trash concerns and the need for a community center in Berea's subsidized housing communities.)

"[W]hat else am I going to do if I can see that there's a problem or a challenge and that there's a solution?" she asks.

'SHE SEEMS TO HAVE A VISION'

An e-mail in Leforce's inbox in late 2019 came as a bit of a shock. In fact, at first she thought it was spam.

The message announced that she had won the Community Service Rural Spirit Award, which recognizes "an individual who exhibits exceptional service in the name of community growth." The award is sponsored by Osborn Barr Paramore, an advertising, marketing and public relations agency that specializes in working with agricultural and rural-based industries.

Just a few weeks later, she was off to St. Louis to accept the award.

"It was really a great opportunity to feel like our work is being seen and noticed and that it can maybe be inspiring to some other folks as something they can do where they are," she says.

Leforce eventually found out that Lloyd Jordison, the health education director at the Madison County Health Department, had nominated her. Jordison calls her an asset to the community.

"I'm impressed with her compassion and her desire to make the community better," Jordison says. "And her willingness and ability to collaborate. So, compassion and collaboration are big. I just really respect her for that."

In addition, he says that Leforce has an unusual ability to look ahead — to the future.

"She's developed some things with this program [Berea Kids Eat] that are so positive and so helpful to the community, but there's more than that. She's looking beyond, to the next steps," he says. "She seems to have a vision or be able to visualize what a healthy community can be. And she talks with people. She brings people along. And I just appreciate that vision."

Adds Cooke, her boss at Grow Appalachia: "Martina

is one of the most impactful and effective young leaders in the entire Appalachian region. She brings an uncommon but powerful combination of administrative competence and vision and matches that with a deep personal passion to serve the children and families in the area."

'JUST TRYING TO MAKE IT HAPPEN DURING COVID'

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit earlier this year, so much changed for everyone, everywhere. For Leforce and Berea Kids Eat, it meant adapting and pivoting.

Once local schools shut down in March and area children lost access to the morning and afternoon meals they typically ate there, Berea Kids Eat applied for a waiver to begin serving students. A centralized, drive-thru pick-up location was established at the Berea Community School. And, meals have been available for pickup three days a week — on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays — with each meal pack containing enough food to last two days. The Friday pickup includes meals for the weekend. Limited no-contact home delivery has also been available.

"We're basically doing the work that the schools were doing when school is in session," Leforce says. "We're just trying to make it happen during COVID."

Berea Kids Eat has continued to partner with the college's dinning services company to prepare meals and also expanded to add the Berea Community School's food service staff as a vendor. In addition, Leforce enlisted some area restaurants to supply food, which, she says, will help them to remain financially stable during the pandemic. (On a recent Friday, one of those local businesses had baked and prepared enough biscuits and gravy to feed a small army.)

Through late September, Berea Kids Eat had already served more than 200,000 meals. Families from a total of seven counties have stopped by to pick up food.

"[I]t's very different than what we're used to doing," Leforce says. "But, you know, what makes it possible is partnerships and trust. I mean, that's all it comes down to is partnerships, trusting those partners and, you know, putting our engagement area first. It's really about these kids. It's about these families."

And, it's those partnerships, really, that has made much of what Leforce has dreamed up — and what Berea Kids Eat has been able to accomplish — possible.

"[S]howing up to each other's meetings, listening to one another and offering what we can contribute. I think showing up, listening, engaging — that's the most important thing," she says.

'AN EQUAL PARTNER IN THAT WORK'

Just what Berea Kids Eat will look like in the future is a bit uncertain at the moment. Leforce herself isn't completely sure.

"Martina is one of the most impactful and effective young leaders in the entire Appalachian region. She brings an uncommon but powerful combination of administrative competence and vision and matches that with a deep personal passion to serve the children and families in the area."

— David Cooke, founder & director Grow Appalachia

She expects the organization's COVID-related response to continue through next year.

There's also work to still be completed on the mobile meals classroom.

She and the staff at Grow Appalachia have been involved in a year-long strategic planning process — trying to make some sense out of how all of the organization's programs and initiatives connect together and setting goals for the next few years.

In the long-term, Leforce says, Berea Kids Eat will always have as its primary focus serving as a USDA-sponsored child nutrition program. It's the reason Berea Kids Eat was initially founded. But exactly what that may end up looking like and who the organization might partner with on future projects is still a work-in-progress.

"I think that there's really an opportunity to work with schools, the library, families, to really align resources as much as possible, to really build a more food secure community," she says. "Is Berea Kids Eat going to be the facilitator of that or a keystone in that? I don't think so. I think we are going to be an equal partner in that work."

No matter the future shape of specific Berea Kids Eat initiatives, don't expect Leforce to slow down. She'll continue to think outside the box, dream, plan and labor — all in service of fighting hunger and increasing access to healthy food.

"Children are resources and they're worth investing in," she says. ▪

Michael McGill is a Rural Project Manager in the Kentucky Office of Rural Health.

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