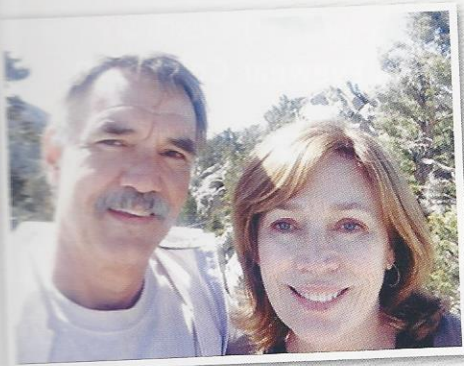


Keeping the Mission Alive



Couple Works to Feed Needy School Children in Son's Memory

Story & Photos by Del Duduit



Mark and Tracy Hunter

Every Friday during the school week, hundreds of local, needy and hungry elementary school children not only take home healthy food – they also take home a part of Steven Hunter.

In 2003, Hunter graduated from Portsmouth High School (PHS), where he was an accomplished tennis player and was well known as the PHS mascot, Captain Trojan. He was attending Milligan University in Tennessee when tragedy struck in January 2006. At age 21, he died suddenly on campus from a heart disorder.

Soon after his death, the Steven A. Hunter Hope Fund was established by his parents in his memory – to do what Steven loved to do the most – help people in need. "Steven was a true philanthropist," said Mark Hunter, Steven's father and co-founder of the fund.

"The word actually means to love humanity and make life better. He loved life and truly loved helping people."

"Everyone – and I mean everyone – loved Steven," Mark said. "He was always helping people, especially those who did not enjoy the same privileges that he enjoyed."

Originally established to provide basic needs to school children in the Portsmouth school system, the Hope Fund later grew to include Steven's Power Pack Club, which is geared to provide food items to elementary children with financial needs.

The Hope Fund formed a partnership with the Freestore FoodBank in Cincinnati via the Power Pack Program. A power pack is a bag packed with nutritious food items and distributed to elementary students who qualify to take them home each Friday during the school year. Each power pack has 15 items of nutritional food, are child friendly, non-perishable and easy to prepare – about four meals in all.

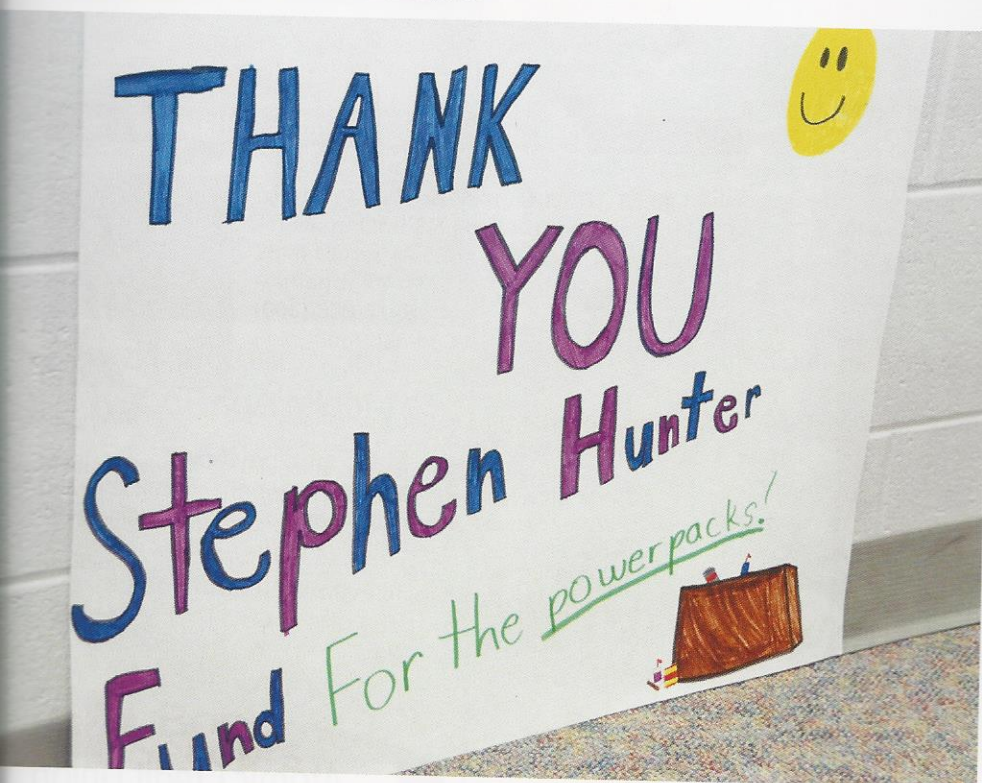
According to statistics from Feeding America®, nearly one out of three children in Scioto, Pike and Adams counties are considered to be "food insecure." "That means they go home hungry," Mark added. "We need to do what we can to feed them. These kids don't ask to be hungry and we need to help them."

Bloom-Vernon Elementary School Principal Sandy Smith echoed Mark's words. "The need is so great," she said. "We have some students who get to take food home with them for the weekend, and honestly that's all they will have to eat until they come back to school the following Monday." Bloom-Vernon, in Scioto County, is one of many participating schools throughout the three-county region.

Now, 10 years after his death, Steven's Power Pack Club supplies food to about 900 hungry children in 15 elementary schools in Scioto, Pike and Adams counties.



Each Friday, elementary students who qualify are given a "Power Pack" loaded with nutritional foods.



“It’s all about helping the needy and the children, and that’s what Steven always did” – Mark Hunter

“To watch some of these children’s faces when they receive their Power Pack is humbling,” Mark explained. “It’s still hard to believe how excited children can get when they receive a pack of food. They get these big smiles on their faces.”

Smith said the Power Pack Club feeds about 60 students at Bloom-Vernon and the school adds another 43 packs. Maria Swick, a local volunteer at the school, comes in and puts the power packs together for the students each week.

“When they see her (Maria) coming, the students get so excited because they know they will have food for the weekend,” Smith added. “It’s really an amazing undertaking.”

Mark said the teachers and counselors at each school choose the children who join the club. “Once we started this, our eyes were opened to the issue of real hunger right here in Scioto County. My wife Virgie is a home care nurse and has witnessed children experiencing real hunger. She said to me one evening that we were not doing enough to help these children.”

So what started out as a local charity to help keep Steven’s memory alive has now blossomed into an outreach that has become a weekly highlight for elementary students in need across the region.

“It just keeps growing,” Mark said. “The Power Pack Club is the epitome of Steven because he loved helping and was always giving. In fact, the last picture we have of him was when he was packing food at a shelter to help someone in need.”

Smith said Bloom-Vernon has been participating in the program for about five years. “What Mark and Virgie are doing is remarkable,” she added. “They truly have the kids at heart.”

For the Hunters, it’s a calling and a ministry – and a way to keep their son’s mission alive. “All of this – everything we do is Steven,” Mark said. “It’s all about helping the needy and the children, and that’s what Steven always did.”

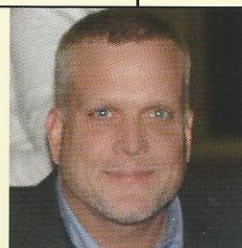
To help or contribute to the Steven A. Hunter Hope Fund, go to www.stevenshopefund.org.



Hundreds of elementary students across the region look forward to receiving the packs of food.

About the Author:

Del Dudit is a freelance writer who lives in Lucasville, Ohio.



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