

I originally started serving at GraceWorks shortly after our family moved to TN. I had met Gigi Johns, who was currently volunteering at GraceWorks, and she invited me to volunteer with her. I had volunteered with a similar organization in Texas, so I was excited to have a place to serve, but also a place to meet people.

Initially, as a food pantry volunteer, our job was to process donated pantry items by making sure items were not out of date, sorting the items, placing them on shelves, and ultimately filling grocery carts with these items that were given to neighbors. We had zero contact with neighbors. In 2017, the food pantry was completely rearranged for “open shopping,” which meant neighbors were now allowed to come into the pantry and personally select items off the shelves based on a shopping list given to them. This radically changed our roles in the food pantry. We were still processing food, but now we were having direct contact with the neighbors. For me, this direct contact was originally a bit uncomfortable, but ultimately, it was life changing and impactful. To see the very people who are getting the food, to walk with them as they are shopping and hear their stories, to hold their babies, and interact with their children, made this personal.

I have so many stories I could share, but I will share a few that have impacted me the most.

One afternoon, a woman walked into the pantry with an older gentleman named John. John was hanging tightly to the shopping cart and shuffling along as he walked. The woman was trying to shop as she was trying to guide him along. I immediately recognized my dad, who suffers from several neurological disorders, in John. I began to help the woman who explained to me that John was her neighbor. He was suffering from Parkinson’s disease, and his family had abandoned him. Then John started saying he needed to use the bathroom and I could tell it was urgent. The woman was becoming frazzled, so I offered to take him. He was very hesitant to go with me, but finally agreed to allow me to walk him to the bathroom. As John shuffled along, holding my arm, I thought of my dad. He suffers from tremors and dementia and walking with John was like walking with my dad. After John was finished, I helped the woman take the groceries to her car and she told me more about her story, her own struggles, as she was at GraceWorks getting food for herself, and her struggles in trying to help John. It broke my heart, and I was immediately struck by the fact that this woman in the midst of her own struggles, was still trying to help her neighbor. If that’s not the love of Christ, I don’t know what is.

One afternoon, a woman walked into the pantry for food and I noticed she seemed to be on the verge of tears. She also looked familiar to me, but I couldn’t place where I might know her from. I offered to help her, and as we loaded her cart, she told me her story. Her husband had recently suffered from a stroke. He was unable to work and was the main source of income. She worked for the school district but had to quit her job to take care of her husband. With no income and kids at home, they were struggling and needed food. Then she shared with me that she used to volunteer at GraceWorks. She talked at length about how she never imagined they would be in this position, and then said something I’ve never forgotten. “We are all just one crisis away from needing GraceWorks ourselves.”

On one of those winter days when rain is predicted to move in along with plunging temperatures, a young woman came into the pantry very clearly upset. I offered to help her with the shopping, and as we finished, she broke down. She told me she wasn't from the area. She had moved to help take care of her grandmother. Her grandmother had died, and she couldn't stay where her grandmother had been living. So she moved in with a guy she had met, and then he beat her. The police had come, he was arrested and taken to jail, and she was again homeless. What little she had was still at this guy's house, but she couldn't get it. She didn't know where she would be sleeping that night, and with the predicted rain and cold being forecasted for the night, she said to me through tears and anger, "I don't want to sleep outside. I don't want to be wet and cold." She also told me she was a believer and she wanted to know where was God. I didn't know what to say. It still haunts me. I was once again reminded of how fortunate I am to have shelter. A place that's warm and dry and safe. So many don't.

As I mentioned earlier, when the neighbors were allowed to physically come into the pantry and shop, I was a little uncomfortable, but I am so thankful for it. It put me face to face with real people with real needs. It opened my eyes to the need right in my own community. I am thankful for all that GraceWorks does and for what volunteering with them has done for me in my own personal spiritual journey.