

'The Spirit Of Community'

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QUICKSBURG — Although no classes were in session because of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the cafeteria at Stonewall Jackson High School was bustling Monday afternoon as volunteers packed meals for needy families.

Max Finberg, director of AmeriCorps VISTA, led a group of roughly 50 volunteers ranging in age from 4 to 92 as they packed dried rice, beans and vegetables in bags.

AmeriCorps is a private-public program with the goal of engaging adults in community service work.

Finberg said communities across the country were doing similar projects Monday, but most were in large cities.

"We're here in Quicksburg to show that there's hunger and poverty in rural areas, too," he said. "It might look a little different than urban poverty, but it exists."

Finberg said the service project was the kickoff of AmeriCorps' new service campaign, Serve Rural.

"It's usually a little harder to organize service projects in rural areas," said Doug O'Brien, senior adviser of the White House Rural Council, "but the spirit of community is so prevalent in these areas."

Monday's volunteer effort was made up of people both from the Valley and those living farther away.

Leslie Jones, an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, came from Alexandria to help package meals.

"This seemed like a good way to give back today," Jones said.

Meanwhile, Iona Wildt had a much shorter trip. At age 92, the Mount Jackson resident was the oldest volunteer at Monday's event.

"My daughter and granddaughter are here, and they said, 'Well, Granny, you can come if you want to,' so I did," she said. "I live to volunteer."

Many of the volunteers were members of the Corhaven Kids' Club, a faith-based after-school program in Quicksburg, and Finberg said many of the volunteers found out about the event through the club.

"Martin Luther King Day is a day of service," he said. "We call it a day on, and a lot of people took that to heart."

The food was packaged according to directions from Iowa-based Outreach International.

According to Rick McNary, the organization's vice president of private and public partnerships, each vacuum-sealed bag contains six servings of food. The team set a goal of packaging 5,000 meals.

Still House Creek Orchards, based in Batesville, donated 2,100 pounds of apples that will be sent with the prepackaged meals, said Sarah Ramey, director of the Virginia Gleaning Network.

Ramey said the network works with farms to "glean" fields after commercial harvesting operations have been done to take any leftover food to donate to needy families.

McNary said all the food packaged on Monday will stay in the Valley.

Donations will go to Luke's Backpack, a program through the Shenandoah Valley Lutheran Ministries that helps feed needy families in Shenandoah County.

Finberg said any leftover food will go to the New Market Food Pantry.

While he said this event was the first in the Valley, he hopes service projects like Monday's will continue.

"We're just launching the Serve Rural campaign today, and there are a lot of opportunities outside of Martin Luther King Day to serve in these communities," he said. "I look forward to continuing the conversation and seeing how else we can help."

Valley organizations that need a little extra help could apply to host an AmeriCorps team, because part its mission is rallying local volunteers.

"We're used to raising barns and helping out our friends and neighbors in these rural communities," Finberg said. "But we don't call it 'service projects.' We call it 'being a good neighbor.'"

For more information about AmeriCorps VISTA, visit www.serve.gov.

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- **Caption:** Max Finberg (left), director of AmeriCorps VISTA, helps Doug O'Brien (center), senior adviser of the White House Rural Council, and his daughter Molly, 6, seal a box of meals for needy families in Shenandoah County. The event was held Monday at Stonewall Jackson High School in Quicksburg in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. (Photos by Rachel Cisto / DN-R) Gracie Thomas (center), 5, of Quicksburg, helps package rice and beans Monday at the event. Sarah Ramey, director of the Virginia Gleaning Network, holds a bag of apples Monday from Still House Creek Orchards in Batesville. Still House Creek gave 2,100 pounds of apples to Luke's Backpack and the New Market Food Pantry.

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