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This fifth grader is working to fight food insecurity in Memphis area



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A Collierville 11-year-old is showing you can make a difference in your community no matter how old you are.

In November, Jack Knight — along with the help of his father, Alex Knight — launched [Help Memphis](#), which focuses on addressing food insecurity through small, accessible community pantries.

The idea was inspired by Little Free Pantries, which are similar to the Little Free Libraries model — but instead of books, people fill the little pantries with nonperishable food.

Jack's first and only cabinet so far is located at The Mercantile Off Main at 164 Washington St. on the Collierville Town Square. It is stocked with everyday essentials such as canned goods, pasta, cereal and peanut butter.

“These pantries are like Little Free Libraries in a sense (where) you can take a canned good out of it or put a canned good in,” said Jack, a fifth grader at St. George’s Independent School. “The idea is if they (pantries) get too low that we’ll restock them, but the hope is that we never have to restock them. People can come by with a nonexpired canned good or nonperishable (food) and put it in the pantry. You don’t have to fill out a form. We’re trying to make it as easy to donate as possible.”

Bringing community together to solve a problem

Alex is a volunteer substitute teacher at St. George's Independent School. Jack said one school day his dad saw a couple students not eating their lunch. He said one of them stated that they needed the leftovers to have food for when they go home.

Jack had compassion for his fellow students. The situation sparked something in him where he wanted to help those in the community who don't always have the means to buy food. Alex said Jack was more driven after he learned how people locally with SNAP benefits were going to lose the ability to purchase food and feed their families due to the federal government shutdown.

"I don't think anyone should have to experience not having enough food since that's something that's a basic necessity for life," Jack said.

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Jack sprung into action and started doing research on what affordable cabinet they should purchase for the pantry, which led them to buying one from Lowe's and getting canned food goods from Aldi. Help Memphis is also working with schools, churches and community organizations to expand the initiative across the area in places including Orange Mound, Frayser and Whitehaven.

"While we only have one pantry, we have 15 other locations (in Memphis) that said we can set up there," Jack said. "We're just trying to get the pantries and canned goods to set up there. ... It's amazing how the community can come together to help solve this horrible issue."

Expanding beyond food needs in community

Jack said the reason why they decided to name the initiative Help Memphis is because of other ideas he has for the pantry cabinets. These ideas include possibly filling them with school supplies in August for children going back to school or coats in the winter for those who need them. Jack said several of the Memphis

locations he and his father have talked with are preschools, and the hope there is to fill those pantries with diapers and baby supplies in addition to canned goods.

"We heard that they give the kids diapers at school and then they leave with that diaper and then they come back with the same diaper on, which is really sad," Jack said.

Having the heart to help people in need and doing community-minded work is something that has been instilled in Jack from his parents. His mother, Amy Knight, serves as a community volunteer on the boards of the Children's Museum of Memphis and The Orpheum Theatre Group.

"We're pretty philanthropic, and my son sees a lot of charity in our household," Alex said. "So clearly, he has figured out a way to make something for himself for him to do. It has been a great experience, especially seeing his confidence level increase and molding it to what he wants it to be. While there's no profit opportunity at all, he's running it like a little business."

Jack is learning that making a difference in the community can go a long way.

"Anyone can help with any communal issue," he said, "and what I'm doing is hopefully just a small part of what the community is planning to do for people in need."

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