



A Trail of Charity

*Knights of Columbus Food for Families initiative
inspires fraternity, volunteerism and helping
neighbors in need*

by Patrick Scalisi

*The Knight of Columbus Journey for Charity Tractor Cruise wends its way
along the outer road of I-44 in St. Clair, Mo.*



Don Brinker (left) divides the food donations for several food pantries at the end of the Knights of Columbus Journey for Charity.

On what John Jasper called a “perfect” September day in eastern Missouri, 83 tractors lined up Sunday, Sept. 9, in the parking lot of a die casting plant in St. Clair. With grilles painted in hues from fire-engine red to iceberg blue to the traditional John Deere green and yellow, the tractors were primed to begin a 30-mile overland cruise that would take them through three townships.

Jasper, a polite man with a pronounced Midwestern twang, was one of the chief organizers of the cruise. The weather, he said, was a blessing.

“It was 54 degrees that morning,” he recalled. “It was clear. And you couldn’t ask for a better September day. It just makes this project a whole lot easier.”

The “project” had nothing to do with showing off farm equipment or taking a leisurely Sunday drive. Rather, the purpose of the tractor cruise was to collect provisions and funds for local food banks as part of the Knights of Columbus Food for Families initiative.

Just as the tractors are used, in part, to harvest crops at the end of the growing season, on this day they were used to harvest donations for food pantries that continue to struggle in a mired economy that sees millions of people unemployed and underemployed. A joint project of Seisl Council 1121 in Washington, Mathaushek Council 1576 in Union, Bishop

Leo John Stech Council 4667 in Saint Clair and Msgr. George J. Hildner Council 8073 in Villa Ridge, the cruise is just one way that the Food for Families program is helping the hungry and needy during continuously trying times.

CRUISIN’ ALONG

Conceived five years ago, the tractor cruise in Missouri has seen steady growth since it launched in 2008. Dubbed the “Knights of Columbus Journey for Charity,” the most recent event netted approximately 1,000 pounds of food and \$19,000 in donations.

Jasper, a member of Council 1576, and other organizers came up with the idea after seeing news stories about similar events in other cities. The Knights decided to plan their own cruise and solicited the cooperation of local councils when it became clear that the event would pass through several townships on its 30-mile route.

“It was really hard to market because nobody really understood what we were trying to do,” Jasper explained. “The first year was really hard to get off the ground.”

Even the weather seemed unwilling to cooperate that initial year; rain from Hurricane Ike nearly dampened the first tractor cruise, clearing up — providentially — when a priest came to bless the fleet of tractors at 11 a.m. Since then, the event

has seen consistently good weather, as well as an increase in participants and donations.

“One of our duties in being a Knight is to answer the call of charity,” Jasper said. “This is a way that we felt that we could meet these needs and have fun doing it.”

Indeed, the K of C organizers wanted to craft an event that was open to participants of all faith traditions.

“A good percentage of the people who are there every year are not Catholic and they ... want their tractors blessed also,” said Grand Knight Richard Bolzenius of Council 1576.

Bolzenius, who oversees the event’s finances, added that several of the food pantries that receive assistance from the cruise are run by other Christian denominations, and not everyone who receives support is Christian.

FOOD FOR ALL

Launched in February 2009 at a K of C-sponsored summit on volunteerism in New York City, the Food for Families initiative falls under the Order’s Neighbors Helping Neighbors umbrella, which, in turn, was established at the height of the economic downturn to help the needy on several fronts. Through the Coats for Kids program, for instance, Knights provide warm winter coats to needy children in cold-weather cities. Food for Families, meanwhile, ensures that those children — along with their parents and siblings — have adequate access to nutritious food.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 17.9 million households experienced “food insecurity” in 2011, meaning that they had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources.

“Times are probably tougher than they’ve been in years and years,” said Bolzenius. “It’s probably slowly getting better, but it’s getting better too slowly for the people really in need and the people with kids. ... We see a lot of families come into the food pantry that maybe were giving five years ago. Now they’re on the receiving end.”

To combat this situation, Food for Families has seen the launch of several ingenious programs at the grassroots level. For instance, Our Lady of Guadalupe Council 8306 in Helotes, Texas, started the 40 Cans for Lent food drive in 2011, which has since become an Orderwide initiative. The program encourages council members and parishioners to contribute one can of nonperishable food per day for the duration of Lent. And last year, Tillamook (Ore.) Council 2171 planted a community vegetable garden that yielded more than

14,280 pounds of fresh food, a commodity that food pantries often lack. These projects — and hundreds more — have done wonders to keep food banks stocked and serviceable.

As added incentive, the Order recently announced the Food for Families Reimbursement Program (see sidebar), which will offer rebates to councils that provide financial assistance to food banks and food pantries. Councils and Squires circles are both eligible to participate.

EFFORTS REWARDED

In Missouri, the Knights of Columbus Journey for Charity has been a boon for local food banks — and families — trying to make ends meet.

“We just know that the [food pantries] are stressed out,” said Jasper. “We just know from being in the community that there are a lot of folks that are down.”

For the 2012 tractor cruise, the Knights announced that they would collect food along the route, in addition to the entry fees provided by the drivers and sponsors. This method,

according to Bolzenius, was highly successful.

“People were waiting along the route with bags of canned goods *and money*,” he said. “People would walk up and hand money to the drivers of the collection vehicles.”

The cruise has even been successful in reigniting the volunteer spirit among members, especially since the cruise requires so much manpower to organize.

Darryl Holtmeyer had not been active in Council 1121 for about 30 years. Despite joining the Knights as a young man at the urg-

ing of his father and advancing to the Fourth Degree, Holtmeyer explained that family obligations often got in the way of participating in council events. Now, at age 61, he serves as the tractor cruise chairman of his council.

“Now that I’ve done that, I’m really happy about it,” said Holtmeyer. “I’m going to try to get more members interested in this project and try to do a little more for the council.”

With so many spinning gears, the organizers admit that the Journey for Charity can seem like a daunting event to plan. But when it goes off right — and the weather cooperates — the results can be extraordinary.

Explained Jasper, “When you have a day like we had Sunday and a big turn out ... it just motivates you to get next year’s started and going.” ♦

**FOOD FOR FAMILIES
REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAM**

Announced by the Supreme Council in September, the Food for Families Reimbursement Program will offer rebates to councils that provide financial assistance to food banks and food pantries. For every \$500 that a council or assembly donates to a food bank, the Supreme Council will refund \$100, up to a maximum refund of \$500 per council (based on \$2,500 in contributions) per fraternal year. Columbian Squires circles can also receive a refund of \$20 for every \$100 contributed.

To qualify, councils simply need to complete the Food for Families Reimbursement Program Report Form (available at kofc.org/forms) by June 30, 2013.

PATRICK SCALISI is the associate editor of *Columbia* magazine.



Clockwise, from top: Father Bob Knight and Deacon Harvey Dubbs bless the tractor fleet before the tractor cruise embarks on its charitable venture. • The organizing committee of the annual Knights of Columbus Journey for Charity pose for a picture before the start of the event. • Spectators wave as the tractors pass through downtown Union, Mo. • A young girl sits on the tire of her father's tractor, enjoying a rest break at the home of Mathaushek Council 1576.

