

## **Revealing the face of hunger**

*A speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, Calgary, Thursday, May 27, 2004*

by Marilyn Gunn, executive director of Community Kitchen Program of Calgary

As you have heard, community kitchens have grown. And why have they grown, and why has our agency flourished?

I'd like to say from the very beginning that the community kitchens do not belong to Marilyn Gunn, the community kitchens belong to the Lord. It was God's impression on me to start them and I take the Lord's leading every day in how to continue to have this agency grow and to reach out to other people in the city of Calgary.

Right now, the community kitchen last year, believe it or not, put \$1.7 million worth of savings back into the city of Calgary – to our various programs we run. I have brought a profile with me and you can take it when you leave.

I want to give you some alarming stats about hunger in our city. A lot of us think hunger is just the homeless in the downtown core but what I found is that hunger is not there. Yes, there are hungry, but they have places like the drop-in centre, they have the Mustard Seed, they have Feed the Hungry on Sunday nights. Many organizations bring down sandwiches and food for them.

Hunger is hidden. It's behind closed doors in all our neighbourhoods and I'm finding it more and more. The faces of hunger of this city are the children living in poverty and going without, and the families.

Did you know that 24 percent of Calgary's children live in low-income households? Do you know how many children that is? That's 38,410. That's an awful lot of children right here in one of the wealthiest cities of Canada. Over 9,000 Calgary families are one-parent families with low-incomes. That means just a single mom, and we're finding a new thing, single dads. We never realized that moms are now leaving the home and dads are left with the responsibility of raising the children. Over 12,000 people live with extreme low incomes – \$16,000 a year for a family of four. Could you imagine trying to live on that and pay the rent, buy the food, buy clothing, pay the utility bills, put gas in your vehicle to get to work, even buy a vehicle? That's next to impossible.

But worst of all is 20,889 have poor quality diets. What does that mean, and what does that look like? That means children are going to school with a bag of chips, a can of Coke, maybe a chocolate bar, and maybe that's it, maybe nothing.

Most in low-income families do not get fresh fruit and vegetables. That's the very first thing people cut off their grocery list. They don't cut off the Kraft dinner and the hot dogs. They cut off the fresh fruit and vegetables. Milk to some families is a delicacy. Can you imagine? Every child should be able to have milk anytime they want at any meal.

Another 6,636 children in our city face persistent hunger that goes unmet daily. These are children in our school, these are the ones that we can count, these are not the ones from 0-5. These children arrive at school with no breakfast, and no lunch, and sometimes maybe just two slices of bread and a bit of peanut butter for supper. That's alarming in our city. That shouldn't be happening anywhere in Canada.

Another 9,536 children experience intermittent hunger needs that go unmet. What that means is maybe they get to eat three nights out of the week, instead of seven. Maybe they have complete meals five times a week. Isn't that scary? I find it alarming.

A lot of our mothers, I'm finding now – single moms – they make a minimum wage, which is \$5.90, the lowest in Canada, right here in Calgary. I figured that out today. In other words, they bring home \$236 a week before deductions. I challenge you, can any of you live on that? That's \$12,272 a year and many of them have children.

Hunger is your neighbour. It's in your neighbourhood. It's behind closed doors. Many of these people will not tell you they're hungry. How many of you know whether your neighbours' children had breakfast this morning? Do you know what they ate tonight? It doesn't happen, we don't know.

But when we see the children in the schools now, we realize that their learning capabilities are not there. They're lethargic. Come 10 o'clock in the morning, they're not thinking anymore. Can you believe that? They cannot concentrate. Why? Because they're so hungry.

Many of them become isolated, and when a child isolates himself he pulls completely back. I've been into the schools of Calgary and I've seen the children now. They isolate themselves; they don't have friends; they pull back; they don't play with anybody at recess; they don't go outside at recess; they learn to walk around the washrooms; they don't want anybody to know how they're feeling. Come lunch hour they don't want to let anybody to know that they have no food.

With that, the community kitchen program and myself, I decided to go on a mission. It's very interesting, when I started the kitchens, I started them in my laundry room with one little kitchen. It just kept on growing and growing.

Then one day, I was asked to be part of the Feeding Calgary's Children Initiative. Joanne Kirving said there's an initiative going on and we want you to go and see this, Marilyn, and be part of it. And my eyes were open and that's where I saw the children. That's where I saw hunger like never before. So we started the Good Food Box program. That's a program where families can buy the very first things they take off their shopping list: fresh fruit and vegetables.

And once again we'll "hand up," not "hand out," so we encourage people. We believe that people have to retain their sense of pride, and they have to feel like they can do it, that they are really supporting their family.

We started the Good Food Box three years ago. We started with 31 boxes and we thought, "wow, this is great, 31 boxes a month, we're reaching 31 families in the city." Well this week we are well over 1,000 boxes a month. The calls keep coming in. We can't keep up with them.

Where are these calls coming from, you're going to ask me. Well, the Calgary Interfaith Food Bank, after people get five days of food, they say: "Sorry, you can't apply anymore. You'd better try these other programs." They are referred to us.

We're not a large agency – we have six staff but we have a host of volunteers. So we've said: "Okay, we're going to run with this." But we can't keep up with the calls anymore.

I have a warehouse, and people started dropping off food on my loading dock. So we started a program called Spinsaround. Spinsaround is going out and rescuing perishables because we realized that Interfaith Food Bank (and thank the Lord for them) only gives you canned goods and dried goods. What happens to the fruit and vegetables, the milk and the bread? Did you know that – this is just an example from one of our chains – we will go to one store and pick up 16 shopping carts full of bread and buns daily from that store that were going to be compacted. They were going to put that food in the garbage and it was going to the landfill – when we have children hungry.

So now we go to six stores and our truck makes two trips a day to rescue food. We have 42 Calgary agencies come to our warehouse on Tuesdays and Thursdays and load up their cars and take food to clients they know are hungry.

One of the biggest agencies is the Alexander House Centre. If you call them they'll tell that they have Spinsaround and they have the Good Food Box, they're on board. What Spinsaround does is it gets those perishables to homes where there is no food, where people have used up their supply of the food bank.

What does a mom do who has four children, is on very low-income, making minimum wage, after she gets her one week's hamper at the food bank? She has to wait two months before she can get the next hamper. And so in six months, she gets three hampers – 15 days worth of food. Is that going to help her?

We as Calgarians in this city have to come up with some initiative and some thinking outside the box to reach these families, because these children are our future. Believe it or not, these are the people that are going to look after you and I when we get old.

I was at a conference down in Lethbridge, and I was embarrassed. They called me down to speak and they had a lady up from Los Angeles. I got up and told about all the wonderful

things Calgary is doing. We are on the cutting edge. Community kitchens like ours don't exist across Canada. The Food Box doesn't really exist across Canada. Spinsaround doesn't exist. We're so proud that we just started a hot lunch program at one school, we're feeding 81 children a hot lunch who never would have had one. I just kept on talking until at one point this woman got up and said, "Congratulations on your hot lunch program. What took you so long here in Canada? Do you know our federal government, our national government, gives \$3.26 for every child that is in need of a lunch across the USA? There's no qualifying. Only the principal knows what children get fed." She said, "Do you know that crime goes down in every city where they feed children?"

I said, "I believe that."

She said, "Do you know that even the army goes out to raise funds to feed these children?" I thought, am I ever embarrassed. If I could have crawled under the carpet in that auditorium I would have.

Then I went up to a conference in Edmonton and found out that they have a hot-lunch program up there and I can't understand why Calgary hasn't got one. So I've got a bee in my bonnet now; I want to know why.

This summer we're going out to the city parks. Last year we did 20,000 meals in seven weeks in parks in high-need areas in the city. We have a great big mobile unit; it has a big commercial kitchen in it. They gave it to me for the millennium and it was going to be the pride and joy of the city. It's a 48-foot trailer, totally equipped with a generator and everything you could dream of; two great big commercial stoves. They said, "this can be your training unit."

I thought, "My heavens, I can do a lot more with this than training." So we started a program called Tummy Tamers, because the city of Calgary was saying so many children were arriving at city parks not having had breakfast, no lunch, not even a bottle of water. Now we pull in with our mobile unit, we serve 200 hot lunches out of that unit. We pack it up in coolers and we take it over to another park and feed another 200. Then we give out approximately 450 snack bags which contain a bottle of water, a piece of fruit and a snack, usually cheese or something with a bit of protein in it.

We just did two parks the first year. Now we're on the road the full seven weeks. It's the neatest thing, we stay in an area for one week to 15 days, and then we carry food back to those areas. When we pull up: "The food ladies are here" and children come.

At first they didn't trust us. "Why are these people feeding my children? You can't go and eat there because who knows what they're going to say or do. Where did they come from?" Now we have parents that look for us and follow us during the summer wherever we go. Some mothers will get on the bus and take their children to the next site to ensure they have a hot meal that day.

We also started a program called Feeding our Future which feeds 200 children, the same children every day, in four areas. We do East Huntington Hill, the Mocha Resort Centre, and inner city in the Mission area. And this year, we have a major breakthrough, and you know, sometimes only God can open doors that we can't. I've been trying for years to get in to help the Sarcee of the Tsuu T'ina Nation. They've been in my heart; I've really wanted to help those people. Aboriginal children are at the highest risk.

This year I went to them and said, "Can I come in and feed 65 of your children every day this summer?"

They said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I have food and I want to give it to them." They said, "Yeah, we'll take the food, that's not a problem."

Wait a minute, there's strings attached. And they said, "But you're not-for-profit, how can strings be attached?" And I said, "In our other locations, we teach children good choices, bad choices. We teach them nutrition. We teach them that for 50 cents you can buy a little carton of milk and maybe an apple or a banana, rather than a bag of chips and a chocolate bar. We'll teach them nutrition but can you get them to do baseball games, go on hikes, nature walks, anything like that?"

Do you know who stepped up to the plate? Brent Dodginghorse who used to play for the Hitmen. I met with him and said, "If you'll take these children and walk and teach them in the afternoon after we feed them, I'll bring the feeding program in." And he said, "you're on." So this year we're going into Sarcee of the Tsuu T'ina Nation reserve and we're going to reach those children.

So as you can see, hunger is an issue in our city. And as our community kitchens grow, I'm finding hunger isn't just in our city. I've now had rural Alberta call me, and I've met with three mayors. One of them is the mayor of Cremona. We started a kitchen in Cremona because some of our rural people are in dire straits after the drought, the grasshoppers, and everything. They're really struggling.

So we've opened our kitchen and now we're getting the Good Food Box and we want to do a route and connect Cremona, Airdrie, Didsbury, all those little towns and open up kitchens in them and start the Good Food Box delivery. It looks like it's going to happen, and I'm heading outside of Calgary. That was a shock to my system at first.

I had a call from a lady over in Abbotsford, B.C. She said, "I just read an article and can I come and visit you?" She got so excited when I started talking to her she went back and spoke to her church, and her church said, let's run with it. Last week she came and spent a whole week, stayed at my house. We had a fantastic time. We are now going to be opening our first kitchen in Abbotsford, BC.

What we're finding is that hunger is not just here in Calgary. I'm finding it's all over. Most people don't want to talk about hunger.

There's two stories I want to tell you, just to show you what the face of hunger looks like. One of them was about a little boy.

We got some stuff for Spinsaround. You see schools come and pick it up too, and they put all this food out on the table in the hallway. I was meeting with the principal about going in and doing a hot lunch program in that school and the secretary didn't know who I was. I was looking at the table with all the food on it. I could see moms, dropping their children off, picking food off the table and taking it and not feeling embarrassed. They were smiling and they were sharing. I watched one woman take bread, and one woman was talking and they swapped bread and they were having a great time. And I was just kind of happy inside.

The secretary looked at me and said, "You know we get that everyday. I want to tell you a story about a little boy who came and he didn't have any breakfast, he had no lunch. He never went home at lunch even though he was supposed to. The day was really raining so they went out and tried to coax him to come in, because he was going to get very cold and wet.

He said, 'Oh no, no. My mommy told me I could play outside.'

They said, 'Well, have you gone home for lunch?'

He said, 'Oh yeah.'

But they knew that he hadn't, so they said, 'Well, come on in anyway.' He came in and walked by the table; he was eyeing the food. The teacher said to him, 'Are you hungry, son?'

'No, I had lunch.'

She said, 'Are you sure you're not hungry?'

Then he eyed an apple on the table and she said, 'Would you like some of that?'

He picked it up and he looked at it, then put his head down and said, 'Maybe I better not.'

She said, 'Why not?'

He said, 'My mommy told me never to let anybody know I was hungry because they'll come and take me away.'

You see, Child and Family Services will come in if they know there's no food. So now we work with Child and Family Services. The only problem in that home is that there is no food. Through our Spinsaround program, we will give them food, and we will try to get them into a kitchen and we'll work with them in Good Food Box.

That little boy's story broke my heart. I was determined that I was going to do something different. I was going to work to ensure that the children in this city will have access to food. I believe every child has the right to food.

Then I went back to one of our Feeding the Future sites and this is a story that changed my life and made me more determined than ever. These two little boys came in. That day we had a guest speaker from the Calgary Cannons, because we wanted to bring in people to tell these children that eating properly is good, and to mentor them and to talk to them on sportsmanship and being a team player and all these good things. These kids never got to meet anybody like that.

The Cannons players got all excited. They got a huge cake in the shape of a baseball and they were giving out baseballs and signing shirts. These guys just thought it was the neatest thing since the wheel.

These two little guys came in and they stood back and I thought: "Oh, there's isolation happening" – because you can just pick it up, just like that. They came in and they didn't join the other children. They looked at the food, all the food was out on the table.

I walked over and I said, "Please help yourselves, and just go and sit down and join the other kids."

The oldest boy said, 'I didn't come here for me, just for my little brother. I'm babysitting, you know.' I looked at him and thought, you can't more than ten years old. He said, "I'm a big brother, I'm babysitting. I just brought my brother here to eat."

"Well, wonderful, help yourself." The little guy sat down. The little guy ate so fast, I had never ever seen anything like it. It was like a little conveyor belt going up to his mouth. He had it all over his face, he had it down his shirt, he had it on the table. He couldn't get that food into him fast enough. Let me describe to you what this lunch was. They got a full sandwich, they got yogurt, they got a piece of fruit, carrot sticks, celery sticks, dessert and milk. He wolfed that down faster than any other child there.

A baseball player caught sight of this and said: "Look at that kid, what a pig."

I looked at him and I thought, "Mister, all of a sudden, I don't like you." I said, "That is a hungry child, sir. Maybe you've never been hungry. That's a boy who's hungry."

So I watched him. He didn't get in line to get his shirt or his baseball. He started sneaking over to the table where there was more food, and his eyes were looking around. And then I just watched him and his little hand went out and he grabbed another container, kind of hid it.

I walked over to him and I said, "Son, anything worthwhile taking is worthwhile asking for. And you know what, there's always enough food here, you'll never run out."

Well, he took it and he ate it all and he came back to me and he did something so cute. He tugged on my sleeve, he said, "Hey lady, you said if I ask I could get more."

I thought, how could you eat three? I couldn't even eat one of those meals. Those are big meals. I said, "You know what? You're going to be sick if you eat another one." Because you see children will gorge themselves. They will keep on eating until there's nothing left if there's no food at home because they don't know when they're eating next.

He looked at me, and he put his head down, and I saw fear come over him. He looked at his older brother and said, "Can we?"

Brother said, "No."

"Oh please, can we?"

Finally the brother said "Okay."

My assistant and I packed up. We put three or four packs in a bag and just loaded them up.

He looked in the bag, and said, "Wow, we can all eat tonight." Broke my heart. What do you say to a child who looks at you with tears rolling down his face saying, maybe we can all eat tonight? That meant mom too. What do you say to a child? How do you deal with that? I didn't know what to say.

It's against my rule to hug. I always tell my staff you can't touch the children, then we'll get in trouble. I reached down and gave him the biggest hug I could and begged him, "You come back every day, and we'll send food home with you every day." In that food we sent little brochures home – this is where you can get help. Please call. Don't be ashamed. We're here to help you. No one will ever find out who you are.

In September, after the program had closed, the mom phoned and said, "Hi, I'm the lady you send food to every night." She is now in one of our kitchens. Next September she's going to become a co-ordinator in our kitchen. That's the lady who has come the way back.

What do you say to a child? I would like to take that and ask every politician in this country: "What do you say to a child?" They promise that they're going to eradicate child poverty, they've been saying that, but they won't give us money for food. They said no. No to food. And so, as you can see a lot of work has to be done in this area, and I have to be careful I can only advocate ten percent (or lose charitable status -ed.).

I'm a grandma who says: I'm too old and I don't care anymore. I'm going to speak out because I believe in our children and our future. They are our future and they need a chance. I can't see poverty and the lack of food decreasing, I only see it increasing. It's not getting better, people. It's getting worse. The only thing is we're not hearing about it as much anymore. Because of things like, "I can't tell anybody, my mommy said they might come and take me away."



A woman last year, after we fed her child and gave them milk, walked up to me and said, "Marilynn, thank you so much for feeding the children all summer. The meal you gave them was their only hot meal that day. When you didn't come on Saturday and Sunday, we had toast and butter or margarine, sometimes dry toast and jam."

But she said, "I have one question I want to ask you. You gave them milk every day. What am I going to tell my children now? For years I've been taking their glass, filling it with water, and stirring with a spoon and saying 'it's magic, today it's white, maybe tomorrow it's chocolate'. And they believed me. But now they've tasted the real stuff, what am I going to tell them?" These were three and four year olds.

Once again I was left speechless. I never thought I would see this in our city.

But you know what, there is hope. As long as there's people like you and like me, and like other agencies in this city, that are willing to get up and fight for the children and fight against hunger, one day I hope to work myself right out of a job. I want to retire people. Only if we work together, as a group, are we going to combat this.

It's been such a blessing for me to come here tonight to speak and to speak from my heart. As you know, I didn't write a speech out, I never do.

But I want to tell you, that when you see a neighbour, or a little boy, or little girl, sometimes just wonder. You know, watch your neighbour. You can help them. It's just by one hand reaching out and touching another life that we can make a difference. At the community kitchens, when I started it, I said if I can make a change in one life, and in one family, I'll be happy. Now the community kitchen program in Calgary feeds over 18,000 people a month.

I never thought it would get there. I'm sure Dorothy never thought it would get there. But it's just by the grace of God. It's by His leading and His strength that we go forward. This community kitchen was birthed by Him and through Him it will continue.

I want to thank you all for having me tonight. I hope I haven't saddened you, because there are good things. When we see the children eating and they're happy and smiling, that's our reward. Because I do see it. At the end of the week, in the summer, I'll see children happy and smiling and playing and that way we know we've touched a life, and every life we touch will be better. So thank you very much for having me.

If you want to go on the internet, you can go onto the city of Calgary and get all the information on low-income families and the low-income cut off and all those kind of things to back our stats up. Thank you very much for having me and God bless you all.

## Marilyn Gunn

In 1993, Canada was in the grips of a recession and families were having a difficult time making ends meet. Aware of these difficulties, Marilyn Gunn proposed a plan whereby families with lower incomes could better feed themselves for less money. After presenting her ideas to a number of non-profit organizations in Calgary, the first community kitchen was born in 1995, through the participation of Thornhill Baptist Church. Numerous funding partners have helped this organization to grow to include 50 community kitchens. The organization has also expanded to include many other programs that bring the community together for the development of community solutions to the issues of child and family hunger. Marilyn's dream of helping families to make ends meet by giving them a hand up, rather than a hand out, has now grown into an agency that helps to service the gaps in the emergency food delivery system with an eye towards enhancing individual and family responsibility.



- 1996 Founder of Community Kitchen Program of Calgary and Current Executive Director
- 1997 Nomination for Woman of Distinction
- 1999 Outstanding Service, Calgary Association of Self Help
- 2000 Citizen of the Year, Mayor Al Duerr, City of Calgary
- 2001 Integrity Award, Rotary Club
- 2001 Woman of Vision, Global TV
- 2001 Bishop Henry Award, Outstanding Commitment and Service to Catholic Charities  
Ordnained by the International Association of Ministries



### **Public Justice Resource Centre**

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PJRC, founded in 1963, is a research and education organization that responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship in the understanding and discussion of core values and faith perspectives in Canadian public policy debates. It works closely with its sister organization, Citizens for Public Justice.



### **CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE**

[www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca) [cpj@cpj.ca](mailto:cpj@cpj.ca)

CPJ is a national, non-partisan organization that promotes justice in Canadian public affairs. CPJ responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship through research, education and advocacy. CPJ works closely with its sister organization, the Public Justice Resource Centre.

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