



**every**  
**cookie**  
**counts**



**(From left) Ann Marie Gonzalez baking up a storm with daughter Toni-Ann, niece Olivia, sister Doreen Kime, mother-in-law Gladys Gonzalez, sister-in-law Nilsa Perez and mom Gladys Hess.**



When you hold a **Great American Bake Sale**, you're helping to solve one of the most serious problems confronting our country—hunger. Some 49 million people, including 17 million children, don't know where their next meal is coming from. Food stamp enrollment is at a record high, with one in eight Americans getting aid. "Every family or group of friends who steps up can really make a difference in the lives of those who are struggling," says Billy Shore, founder and executive director of Share Our Strength (SOS), a national organization working to end childhood hunger. "A bake sale seems like such a small thing, but for kids at risk, it can mean the world." So roll up your sleeves, get out your measuring cups and start your ovens. You may never come face to face with those you're helping, but you'll have joined hands in a circle of giving and receiving.

BY PAULA CHIN

## giving thanks

Ann Marie Gonzalez has much to be grateful for—a happy, close-knit family, steady work for herself and her husband, plenty of good friends and neighbors in their rural hometown of Glen Spey, New York. But the 42-year-old mom never realized just how fortunate she was until she turned on the news one evening at Christmastime in 2008. "They were showing groups of volunteers handing out turkeys to families who couldn't afford them," she recalls. "The economy was starting to go downhill, and many people had lost their jobs and suddenly found themselves struggling to feed their children. It was heartbreaking."

The next evening, as her family sat down to a holiday feast with all the fixings, Ann Marie mentioned the news story to her husband, Tony, 47, a heating oil company technician, and kids Toni-Ann, 17, and Anthony, 11. "I told them we were blessed to have everything we need, and that we should help others who aren't so lucky," she recalls. "Everyone agreed, and promised right then and there to volunteer. The only question was how. Then I saw an article in *Family Circle* about the Great American Bake Sale (GABS) and thought, 'Now there's something we could do!'" When Ann Marie says "we," she means everyone: She recruited her mom, Gladys Hess, mother-in-law Gladys Gonzalez, sister-in-law Nilsa Perez, sister Doreen Kime, and her 8-year-old niece, Olivia. Serendipity also stepped in. Doreen had a friend who was holding an outdoor charity event in April in nearby Monroe, New York. "By renting our tables there, we'd be helping out her cause and our own," says Ann Marie. "It was perfect."

The three generations gathered in Ann Marie's kitchen on a Saturday and baked their hearts out. "We made all the treats our families love—cupcakes, brownies, Rice Krispies



↳ **“The Backpacks for Healthy Snacks program gave kids more than nutritious food,” says Samantha Bolles. “It made them feel cared for.”**

squares, banana and pumpkin bread,” she says. “Since my mom likes to experiment with new recipes, we also tried chocolate-covered Oreos and pretzels.” Toni-Ann and Olivia were eager to help measure, mix and, most of all, taste-test. Sunday was warm and gorgeous, and the turnout was strong. “We had fun meeting and greeting everyone who stopped by,” says Ann Marie. “People were so generous. Many left money in the big jar we put on the table without buying a thing.” On Monday Ann Marie brought the leftovers to work—she handles billing in a dermatologist’s office—and sold out in an hour.

The Gonzalez girls raised \$470 for GABS. “It made me feel I could make a difference,” says Toni-Ann. The guys have been inspired too. “Tony and Anthony were so proud of us they

want to volunteer at least once a month packing food for the elderly,” says Ann Marie, who plans to hold another bake sale this summer. “The money we raise might stay in our community or go to a food program halfway across the country,” she says. “Either is fine with me. What’s important is that kids who need help will get it. No child—anywhere—should have to go hungry.”

## bridging the gap

With its wildflowers blooming, leafy groves of maple and birch, and sparkling lakes and streams, west Michigan’s Newaygo County looks idyllic in spring. But its natural beauty masks a harsh reality: The 1,200-square-mile region is among the poorest in the state, with 25% of families living in

## FOLLOW THE MONEY

See where your donation dollars go—and all the good you can do—when you hold a Great American Bake Sale.



①

2,500 bake sales were held in 2009, raising **\$1.22 million**. All the proceeds go to ...



②

... **Share Our Strength’s** Washington, D.C., headquarters, which distributes it among hundreds of organizations that offer after-school and summer feeding programs for needy families, such as ...



③

... **the Good Food Gardens (GFG)**, a new venture that gives kids fun, hands-on experience growing fruits and veggies in 12 low-income communities across the country. GFG alone harvests ...



④

... **2,000 pounds of fresh produce** each year, including melons, tomatoes, green peppers and squash. All in all, GABS has raised ...



⑤

... **some \$6 million** since 2003, putting healthy food on the table for nearly 1 million children.



THE NUMBER OF AMERICANS RELYING ON FOOD STAMPS—WHICH HAS BEEN AT RECORD HIGHS SINCE 2007—INCREASED BY 22% IN THE LAST YEAR ALONE. THAT INCLUDES 18.6 MILLION CHILDREN.

↑ **Rhonda Sutherland prepares a dinner salad with a little hands-on help from daughter Breanna and son Joey.**

extreme poverty and 80% without enough to eat. In three of the area's school districts—Baldwin, Hesperia and White Cloud—8 out of 10 elementary- and middle-schoolers are enrolled in the free/reduced-cost lunch program, their only source for a hot, nutritious meal. "These families struggle to put food on the table every day from September to June," says Kiesha Guy, a program director at the nonprofit Newaygo County Community Services (NCCS). "But when school's not in session and lunches aren't available, it's an especially tough time."

To ease the hardship, the NCCS after-school program, Project Focus, started offering a summer session at local schools that offers exercise and healthy-cooking classes as well as free meals. But it wanted to make sure the children had nutritious food on weekends as well. Thanks to a Share Our Strength grant, Backpacks for Healthy Snacks was launched last June, sending kids home every Friday with care packages full of fresh fruits, vegetables and more. Stretching every dollar of funding, NCCS bought no-frills canvas backpacks and purchased organic produce, yogurt, pretzels and granola bars in bulk or on sale from area orchards, vendors and wholesalers. "Once a week staffers would grab a backpack, walk down a row of tables with all the snacks laid out and fill it up—just like an assembly line," says Samantha Bolles, who coordinated the program in White Cloud. "We'd drop them off on Fridays, usually in the cafeteria when the kids weren't there. Their names

were on the inside for privacy, but they could draw pictures and designs to make the backpacks their own. They brought them back on Monday, and the cycle would start again."

The hundreds of students who signed up—any 7- to 14-year-old attending NCCS after-school was eligible—gave the program an A+. "They couldn't wait to open their packs and find a snack they had the previous week and liked," says Samantha. "If they saw something new, they'd say, 'Hey! I've always wanted to try that.' Since our goal wasn't just to fill hungry stomachs but also to teach kids to make smart food choices, that's just what we wanted to hear." NCCS, which would like to extend the program throughout the year and include two additional school districts, is applying for another grant. "Backpacks for Healthy Snacks would not have been possible without SOS," says Samantha. Or without all the money raised at Great American Bake Sales by moms like Ann Marie Gonzalez. It's a simple equation, really—the more cookies sold, the more kids get fed. "Every time hungry children open their backpacks, they may not know exactly who made it possible," says Samantha, "but they do realize there are people out there who really care."

## food for thought

The odds are stacked against the students at White Cloud Upper Elementary School. More than 20% come from families living in extreme

DO YOUR PART TO FIGHT HUNGER. HOLD YOUR OWN SALE OR JOIN ONE THAT'S ALREADY BEEN PLANNED. GO TO [GREATAMERICANBAKESALE.ORG](http://GREATAMERICANBAKESALE.ORG) TO GET A FREE STARTER KIT OR LOCATE A SCHEDULED EVENT NEAR YOU.



↑ **Herman Sutherland is happy to see his kids enjoying fresh produce instead of the usual junk food.**

**ON AN AVERAGE SCHOOL DAY, 19 MILLION KIDS DEPEND ON A FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH.**

poverty. Hunger is endemic, making it hard for kids to focus on their studies. And because parents can often afford only cheap, filling foods laden with empty calories, obesity is widespread. But like many of their schoolmates, the Sutherland sisters—Valerie, 12, Breanna, 10, and Jessica, 8—do their best with what they have. That includes free lunch and the NCCS after-school program and summer session, where they can get homework help and group tutoring as well as sports and computer time.

But what the girls most looked forward to last summer was Fridays, when they eagerly tore into their healthy snacks backpacks. “There was fruit and applesauce, pretzels and crackers, and Yogos—chewy fruit covered with yogurt—which I liked best,” says Breanna. “Sometimes I’d trade stuff with my friends. The only thing I didn’t like was carrying the pack home because it was a little heavy. The snacks would last me the weekend, but Valerie, Jessica and my brother, Joey, who’s in seventh grade, would eat theirs in just one day!”

The siblings weren’t the only fans of the program. “It’s wonderful for families like us who need help feeding our kids,” says their mom, Rhonda. The 32-year-old also relies on food stamps and the NCCS food pantry in nearby Fremont—even

more so now that her husband, Herman, 39, a truck driver for a lumber firm, is often unemployed for months at a time as construction slumps because of the economy. Rhonda was also happy to see her kids chowing down on such wholesome foods. “All that fresh produce was such a nice change from the junk food that they like to eat,” she says. “My only regret was that the vegetables, like celery and carrots, were usually eaten by the time the kids got home, so I didn’t get the chance to cook with them.”

Rhonda has already seen how good nutrition has made an impact. “Valerie and Breanna are now on the honor roll, and I think eating healthier has definitely helped,” she says. And all her children have learned some valuable life lessons not taught in the classroom. “They didn’t say so, but I know they appreciated the discreet way names were put on the inside of the backpacks so no one would know who was getting them,” Rhonda explains. “There’s a lot of peer pressure at school, so this way my kids didn’t get made fun of. At the same time, they understood they were being given something that Mom and Dad couldn’t afford. Now they know it’s okay to help others—and to accept the help that other people offer you.” ●