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At Mission Arlington, a cheerful labor of love

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Hunkered over 4,000 pounds of rice last week in a Mission Arlington building, 45 senior citizens let fly with their measuring cups, freezer bags and good cheer.

For the eighth straight year, the senior Sunday schoolers from First Baptist Church pooled and stretched their donation dollars by purchasing rice in bulk from a discount grocer, then repackaging it for the Mission's Thanksgiving food boxes that will go out to struggling families.

If the loud murmur filling the building was an indication, the members were enjoying their elfish work.

"It's a labor of love done cheerfully," said Glenda Riker. "And that's why it's loud."

The seniors -- many of them born during the Great Depression -- know a thing or two about efficiency. Instead of running out and buying meal-size rice servings at retail prices, they spend \$3,000 to \$4,000 to buy 10,000 to 12,000 pounds of rice from Costco, along with thousands of quart-size storage bags.

This year, they bought 11,000 pounds in 50-pound bags, plus about 450 pounds of pinto beans. Their rebagging project -- called Big MAC, for Big Mission Arlington Challenge -- takes about one hour on three consecutive Thursdays.

"It's for Mission Arlington, and that's a worthy cause," said Kurt Schnellenbach, 78, who spearheads the campaign. "And it gives us something to do to contribute, to help people out. And it's a lot of fun."

Making a difference

The rice might seem like a small part of the Mission's massive year-round relief effort, but not a grain of charity escapes the notice and appreciation of its executive director, Tillie Burgin.

"What they do is a little tradition for them, but it helps these people," said Burgin. "It really does make a difference, because if they can have rice and beans, it holds them. And we've never seen such numbers as far as people needing food."

Mission Arlington is constantly challenged to ramp up its efforts to ease the bleak economy's impact on families, Burgin said. She estimated that for the past six months her organization has been providing food, furniture, medical attention and other services to about 1,000 people a day.

"We're all feeling the increase now," she said.

The First Baptist members -- they belong to what they call the Friendship Department, one of many Sunday school groups at the church -- have other charitable exercise. They also make neck pillows and hand them out to soldiers leaving and arriving at D/FW Airport.

"We give out 100 to 150 on the fourth Monday of every month," said Jack Vaughn.

Friendly contest

Their Mission project started as a competition with a smaller Sunday school department at the church to raise food.

It was a 10-week campaign that produced almost 42,000 food items -- 24,000 of which came from the victorious Friendship Department, member Bob Fuston and others pointed out.

"We had that motivation to beat that other department and put more food items in the food pantry," Fuston said. After the vanquished department declined a rematch the next year, he said, "We started doing rice."

"Certainly rice is a staple. It is one of the lesser expensive food items we could buy and get a lot of volume out of that for the money we put into it."

Thursday's share of the rice was quickly cut down to size. Like the other members, Jannette Workman kept her cause close to heart as she helped.

"We have so many underprivileged children and families," she said. "We need to help everyone we can."

Added Riker, "It's a blessing being involved with these people doing this. And it makes me sleep better at night."

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