

Recipe for Success

Leading an annual chili supper fundraiser ignited this business officer's passion for community service.



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When I first joined All Saints Episcopal School in the assistant to finance role, my family and I decided to check out one of the school's founding parishes, St. Mark's Church. I was familiar with St. Mark's because of its renowned chili supper fundraiser, which has raised money for local nonprofits since 1941 and, to this day, attracts thousands of people from across Southeast Texas. For one day each November, guests gather to enjoy holiday shopping, bid on auction items, connect with parishioners, and visit the Chili Pepper Pub for warm food and live music. The proceeds go to several food banks, rape and suicide crisis centers, the Southeast Texas hospice and St. Mark's Friday morning ministry, a year-round program that provides a warm meal, groceries and basic necessities to individuals experiencing homelessness in our town.

We were taken by what we found at St. Mark's and ended up joining the parish. Little did I know then that I would eventually play a leading role in putting on the church's famous chili fundraiser.

In preparation for the chili supper, St. Mark's volunteer group spends 10 weeks making an average of 280 pints and 190 quarts of chili per week, which we sell frozen and fresh, both in-person and online. At the heart of it all is our secret recipe, which has been in use since the event's founding. In fact, just one parishioner has been in charge of ordering the spices for over 50 years and still keeps a hand-written record of each year's purchases. We've sold out of chili every single year; from the beginning to the end of the event, you'll find a long line leading to our parish hall, which seats about 300 people.

For many years, I had been on the "eating side" of the chili supper but never thought to volunteer, having been busy raising two very active girls. It wasn't until 2016 that I volunteered and realized how much positive change can come from a few people who believe in setting aside their time for the good of others. From that moment, I felt St. Mark's Church was a place I belonged.

Since 2017, I have co-chaired the event and served as treasurer and publicist. As you might expect from a business officer, I make the bank runs and collect the constant flow of checks and invoices between August and November. But I also represent the fundraiser on local radio and TV.



A volunteer serves chili at St. Mark's Chili Supper and Bazaar.

Prior to my work in the ASES business office, I was an accountant for two local television stations for ten years. I feel completely comfortable speaking on TV and telling people why they should come by and support the supper — they're not just purchasing a pint of frozen chili but supporting something much larger. Fortunately, we don't need a whole lot of publicity; the fundraiser is such a tradition that it's become a part of the heartbeat of our community.

On the day of the fundraiser, my morning starts by making sure our volunteers have everything they need to reheat the approximately 3,750 pounds of prepared chili, and by 6 a.m., I am live on broadcast with the local morning show. After that, I'm running back and forth, doing money drops and selling tickets, before I'm able to wrap up at 10 p.m. It's a long day, but everyone is willing to do whatever it takes to make it a success, from selling desserts to taking out the trash. Last year, we were able to distribute \$44,000 to organizations that help those in need.

In 2017, when Hurricane Harvey hit Southeast Texas and flooding devastated the area, many nonprofits struggled to support the increased need while receiving fewer donations. In addition to raising funds for these groups, our volunteers delivered to the hardest hit areas food kits



containing chili, rice, beans, cheese, onions, crackers and coleslaw as well as vouchers to St. Mark's resale shop, where we sell clothes and household essentials.

I learned many lessons co-chairing the supper that year. Above all else, I was amazed by the generosity of our church members. As a mom and a wife, I know how valuable time is, and to see people take off two or three days of work to help deliver chili left such an impact on me. In many ways, it makes my job at ASES more meaningful, because I understand how all the work of the school — including somewhat mundane budgetary decisions — directly affects the students and therefore the community. Over the past nine years, I have watched our students complete service projects and bring those lessons with them past graduation. They have started on their journey of community service decades before I did.

This year, we face yet another unprecedented challenge with the

COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time, our chili supper will be held via all online ordering and with curbside pickup in light of social distancing guidelines. However, I'm certain that it will still raise the funds that are desperately needed in our community. Our motto says it all: "Serving Christ, community and chili."

I can't foresee myself ever forgoing my involvement in the chili supper. I often joke that I'm going to be volunteering until they literally shove me out the door. While my job as a business officer keeps me very busy, this is a passion that feeds my soul. Handling money and the books is a talent I was given, so why not take that talent and do something extraordinary with it? 

We'd love to hear from you! In After School, business officers share a passion or perspective from outside their usual working hours. Want to contribute? Email NetAssets@nboa.org. In the subject line, type **AFTER SCHOOL**.



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