

Decent: As Loaves and Fishes heads into its 40th year, one volunteer's been with them for the long haul



Nancy Malinowski found a volunteer career after her professional career ended, spending the last 26 years helping Loaves and Fishes food pantry in Naperville. (Loaves and Fishes)



By **HILARY DECENT**

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As the longest-serving volunteer, the retired project manager has watched the organization grow from a single unit on Fifth Avenue to a 17,000-square-foot grocery market and offices on High Grove Lane.

“It was very small (when I started), just one unit,” Malinowski said. “It was very manual work because we didn’t have a lot of computers back then. Clients came in with lists. We only covered Naperville.”



Naperville Sun

In this file photo from 2015, then-Loaves and Fishes Board President/CEO Megan Selck, right, talks with Fishes and Loaves food pantry volunteer Carol Boals inside the organization’s new Naperville grocery store. (Jon Langham/Naperville Sun)

Clients received pre-bagged foods with no choice in what they were given.

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“They usually received a pound of hamburger or cheese if we got it from the Northern Illinois Food Bank,” she said. “It was nothing like today. We would make do with what we had, with some extra on holidays.”

Malinowski and her husband, Wally, began volunteering when they retired from AT&T, but before that they brought groups from work to do service projects.

“We started coming in on days off and holidays. It was just a really good feeling and a way we could give back,” she said.

Nowadays, Loaves and Fishes clients get to make their own selections, like you would in any grocery store. But it was a long process getting that that point, Malinowski said. After they ended the pre-bagged foods system, they switched to a shelf setup but clients still couldn’t take whatever they liked, she said.

Clients would indicate what they wanted based on what was on the shelves, but there were restrictions as to how many meats, vegetables, fruits and other items they could receive, she said.

Malinowski played a key role when the pantry moved from Fifth Avenue to the store they built on High Grove Lane in 2011. Her skills as a project manager helped her steer the move and she served on the organization’s board of directors, including a stint as president in 2004.

In 2012, she and her husband were recognized for their contributions to Loaves and Fishes by the Exchange Club of Naperville.

“When we built the new building at High Grove Lane, we started a market,” she said. “It’s been revamped many times. The goal was to have clients shop with assistance if they needed it or otherwise have an adventure in a grocery store.

“Now it’s improved and everything’s computerized. We are able to give diapers and formula to those who need it. People come in and shop like a store. Everything from frozen food and meat to fresh produce and dairy. They can select what they need. It’s just amazing.”

The items they provide come from places like the Northern Illinois Food Bank and local grocery stores as well as individual donations. Years ago, clients would have to visit several food pantries to get everything they needed, but today Loaves and Fishes is more of a one-stop shop.

“When we started, we just gave food,” she said. “Now we offer tax, financial and language advice and may even be able to offer cars. We’re trying to work on the entire process.”

What began as a way to make good use of her spare time has almost become a second career for the grandmother.

And she’s not alone. Last year, volunteers contributed 87,000 hours, the equivalent of 45 full-time employees.

Malinowski has enjoyed getting to know the clients. More than 8,000 people are currently served each week.

“I have seen many over the years. We call them by name,” she said. “People that come tend to keep returning. They’ll talk about their family and kids and I’ve seen some from infancy through grade school. We treat them with respect and dignity. Many feel bad enough that they have to come. If we can make it a good experience, it makes it easier on them.

Malinowski describes herself as being on the “plus side of 75”.

“I would like to keep going here although my contributions will change,” she said. “I’ll have physical limitations, but you’ve got to do something. I recommend volunteering here if you want to feel good about what you’re doing and see results.”

Hilary Decent is a freelance journalist who moved to Naperville from England in 2007. She can be reached at hilarydecent@gmail.com.

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