



Volunteers from several entities participated in the Stuff the Bus food drive for Britepaths' food pantry. In the center (back row) is Braddock District Supervisor John Cook.



PHOTOS BY BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION

At the Britepaths donation table are (from left) Steve Grunch with Volunteer Fairfax, Grace Song, David Meyer, Chris Garris and MPO Reanna Jacobson and MPO Wayne Twombly, both of the Fair Oaks District Police Station.

# 'This Drive Will Help Us Restock'

## Britepaths holds Stuff the Bus event at Fairfax Walmart.

BY BONNIE HOBBS  
THE CONNECTION

Energy and enthusiasm ran high last Saturday, Feb. 16, during the Stuff the Bus food drive for Britepaths. Held at the Walmart in Fairfax City, it was part of Fairfax County's annual initiative to stock local food pantries in the winter.

From 11 a.m.-4 p.m., various volunteers greeted Walmart customers and passed out fliers asking for donations of food or money so the nonprofit Britepaths can continue providing food for local families in need. What was collected was then stuffed into a Fastran bus and brought to the organization's pantry.

"It's great to have all the volunteers here – from Britepaths, youth baseball, Fair Oaks District police, etc.," said Supervisor John Cook (R-Braddock), who dropped by during the event. "And we want to thank Walmart for letting us be at this location. It's wonderful to see so many people be here today to help out their neighbors.

"People sometimes forget that, although Fairfax is a very wealthy county, we have a great many people who live in poverty," he continued. "And we learned during the federal-government shutdown that we have a very large number of people who are working but living paycheck to paycheck. And I just think that part of being a good neighbor is helping people in the community when they're having a tough time – and that's what this is all about."

**THE FAIRFAX ROYALS 13U** Blue Travel Baseball Team not only helped staff the drive all day, but also helped bring the donations back to the food pantry. And play-

ers Kevin Burns and Charlie Barsotti, eighth-graders at Frost and Lanier middle schools, respectively, were among them.

"I wanted to help support families in need that don't have as much as us," explained Kevin. Both boys handed out fliers telling about Britepaths and listing some of the most-needed items.

They included: Canned fruit, cooking oil, dried beans, pizza kits, parmesan cheese, lunch snacks, healthy cereals, shelf-stable milk, laundry detergent, toilet paper and shampoo. Customers were also able to contribute cash, checks and grocery-store gift cards.

Happy to participate, Charlie said, "I just wanted to give back to the community and help people who aren't as fortunate as others are." Also donating was Walmart store manager Lind Godeni, who gave Britepaths 10 Walmart gift cards worth \$25 each, for a total of \$250.

Besides hosting the event, Walmart also provided a parking area in front of the store for the bus. "Walmart really believes in helping the community," said Godeni. "And we always partner up with anybody on the same mission as us – to make people's lives a little easier." Britepaths Programs Director Chris Garris said Stuff the Bus came at a good time for her organization. "Due to the government shutdown, furloughed workers came to our pantry, as well, a couple weeks ago, so it was emptied of much-needed items," she said. "So this drive will help us restock."

She also praised the county government, Office of Public Private Partnerships (Fairfax Community Connections), MV Transportation and Walmart Fairfax for making it all possible. "The partnerships of Stuff the Bus have been so important," said Garris. "They not only brought awareness to the need, but brought together the county, volunteer organizations, youth groups and a local business." She said many of the families Britepaths serves are working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. "They often have to make the choice between buying food or



(From left) Kevin Burns and Charlie Barsotti of the Fairfax Royals 13U "Blue" Baseball Team pass out fliers to Walmart customers, telling them what food items are needed.



(From left) are Walmart store manager Lind Godeni and Britepaths Programs Director Chris Garris during the food drive for Britepaths.

paying their rent," explained Garris. "That's where Britepaths steps in to not only support their emergency needs, but to educate them on budgeting and workforce development – helping them obtain the skills they need to get a better job."

**ALSO LENDING A HAND** at the food drive were Ivy Zarbo and Grace Song, both with the county's Coordinated Services Planning (CSP). Song said people that day asked them about the homeless statistics in Fairfax County and what is the screening process for their services.

"We're an information and resources phone line," said Zarbo. "People ask us, for example, 'Where can I find affordable daycare, how can I get medical care without insurance and where can I get food? And we verify their need.'"

Because of that, said Garris, CSP is an invaluable resource for Britepaths. "We rely heavily on them for their referrals because they do the screening before people come to us for help," she said. "[In turn], we always refer people to them to get connected to the proper resources." "When people call

in with emergency needs, we interview them over the phone," said Song. Zarbo said they ask about the callers' mental and physical health, insurance status and any concerns they have about their children.

"Usually when they call us for help, there's an underlying need," she said. "For example, they can't pay their rent, utilities or medical bills." CSP's number is 703-222-0880, and people speaking multiple languages are available to help.

Coming to the food drive, as well, was Fairfax City Mayor David Meyer. "As an elected official, I know firsthand the impact that Britepaths makes in our City and region," he said. "Governments cannot meet all the needs of their citizens, and Britepaths is one of the most effective organizations in our area that is transforming lives and improving outcomes for persons at risk."

"I commend Walmart for hosting Stuff the Bus, and Fairfax County for its ongoing collaboration with the City and Britepaths," he continued. "The volunteers who give their time, and the many citizens who donated food and money, will know that their support is making a difference."