

https://www.emporiaindependentmessenger.com/news/article_a50a6b8c-83b7-11ee-8111-1ff956f7104a.html

FEATURED

Ruritans race to pack at Rise Against Hunger

By Kayla Hardersen, Staff Writer
Nov 15, 2023



Four or five people huddled around each of the five food stations to take turns pouring soy protein, veggies and rice down a funnel and into each bag. Kayla Hardersen/Independent-Messenger

People who walked into the Meherrin Ruritan Club on Wednesday evening were prompted to put on a hat, hairnet or shave. No one opted for the latter but instead donned red hairnets, stepped to a station set up with funnels and boxes of food and awaited instructions.

The Meherrin Ruritan Club held their annual food-packing event with Rise Against Hunger on Wednesday, Nov. 8. Rusty Lee, Richmond area manager with Rise Against Hunger, welcomed the volunteers and gave a quick rundown of the evening's flow in an effort to reach their packing goal of 10,000 meals.

"There's 800 million people in the world hungry tonight. Ten thousand doesn't seem like it's going to make that big a difference, if we're honest," Lee said. "But you're going to feed 47 kids their school lunches for an entire year."

The first item put into every bag is a packet filled with 23 essential vitamins and minerals. The bag is then filled with a scoop each of soy protein, vegetables and rice. The rice always goes last, veteran packers reminded the first-timers.

Once filled, the bag is passed onto volunteers with a scale who will ensure that each bag weighs between 379 and 384 grams by taking out or adding rice accordingly. From there, the bag is heat sealed, boxed and loaded into Rise Against Hunger's truck to be shipped to one of the organization's international partners.

Wrenn and the Ruritans raised enough money to pack 10,000 meals. Yet to be determined as people began to trickle into the Meherrin Ruritan Club on Skippers Road was if the nearly 60 volunteers could pack that many bags in only two hours. At 5 p.m., halfway through the event, the group had put together just under 5,000 meals.

"If you are a pessimist, we're only halfway," Lee told the group. "If you're an optimist, we're halfway!"

The room cheered with Lee. Volunteers had a little more than half the work left to do and less than half the time they started with in order to complete it. Twelve-year-old Kolten Mitchell refused to let them fall behind.

Mitchell, after some prompting from Lee, became the designated runner of the evening. He paced back and forth between the packing stations and table lined with scales and heat sealers, waiting for his opportunity.

"Runner!" Packers would shout once they had filled a plastic box with bags ready to be weighed and sealed. Mitchell would dart over, exchange the full box for an empty one, and deliver the food to an eager weigher. No table was left unattended for more than a few seconds under Mitchell's watchful eye, speeding up the process as packers no longer had to abandon their stations to deliver food to the next person in the assembly line.

By 5:48 p.m., Mitchell had stopped running. Packers waited patiently at their station having run out of bags to put the food in. Volunteers at the scales watched as the final bags were sealed and tossed onto the boxing table. The room came to a halt.

"The big thing is getting enough people here and we got enough people here," said Bobby Wrenn, event organizer who has been lobbying for months to get volunteers to commit to this year's event. "We packed faster than usual."

Rise Against Hunger's stated mission is "a world without hunger" developed by sending nourishing meals to underserved communities around the globe. The organization's model promotes food security as the foundation of self-sufficient economies. Rise Against Hunger is in its 25th year of service and the Meherrin Ruritan Club has been working alongside them for more than a decade.

Wrenn and the Ruritans received numerous donations from local churches, clubs and individuals to put this event on. Urban Grid Solar donated \$4,000 to the group as a part of the Urban Grid Gives program, according to Community Engagement Manager Amanda Marple. Marple was at a weigh station on Wednesday evening, working alongside the rest of the Emporia-Greenville community who showed up to support the Meherrin Ruritan Club.

"This was a really awesome experience to see everyone come together towards a common goal," said Marple. "It's also very fun, very lively, so we're just thrilled to be a part of this."