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Michael Clemens, carpenter, left, and Ingrid Carmean, homeowner, right, with the newly installed Little Free Pantry.

Little Free Pantries

Community access to food just got better

Story and photos by Benji Astrachan, WSU Clallam Extension

Free food to anyone who needs it, accessible around the clock without barriers, supported by generous community members. "Take what you need, leave what you can."

These are the basic principles behind Port Angeles' new Little Free Pantry, a hand-crafted box that sits at the intersection of Fourth Street and Cherry Street. Without any paperwork, check-in, restrictions on usage or any other impediments that might dissuade someone from using it, the Little Free Pantry represents a new frontier in the struggle against hunger and food insecurity.

Clallam County is home to a long and rich agricultural history and extremely active fisheries and shellfish operations, making it a unique foodie destination and a particularly delicious place to live. However, not all people are able to access the bounty of fresh food coming from the region. In recent measures of

food insecurity by Feeding America, a nonprofit organization devoted to hunger relief, Clallam ranked fourth highest among Washington counties for overall food insecurity and second highest for child food insecurity. This means one in four children on the North Olympic Peninsula does not have reliable access to good food.

Food insecurity is a concept used to track and discuss the lack of access to healthy and affordable food.

Many individuals and organizations already are tackling this issue locally, and the latest to focus its efforts on making food more accessible is Compassion Clallam County, a volunteer group seeking to weave compassion and resilience into the community through a "Food For All" campaign to increase access to good, healthy foods.

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Little Free Pantry on Cherry Street and Fourth Street, stocked with food items and clean water jug.

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The Little Free Pantry is one of several projects Compassion Clallam is implementing to combat hunger, and the first of its kind in Port Angeles. Based on the popular model of Little Free Libraries, the Pantry version instead holds food, as well as whatever other items neighbors and volunteers might add such as basic hygiene kits, hand-knit socks or bottled water. The idea started in Indiana in 2016, but has since grown tremendously. A map at littlefreepantry.org shows many hundreds of the Pantries across the country and even some overseas.

While the tenets are simple — neighbors helping neighbors and food without restrictions — the impacts on the community can be profound.

“Little Free Pantries support an open and creative way of thinking. It’s a simple way to do big things,” Compassion Clallam Steering Committee member and volunteer Hilary Powers said. “Sadly, many people may not think something like this can work because we have to trust one another; trust that others won’t destroy or vandalize the pantry, trust that others

won’t abuse the system. Radical trust is about doing it regardless of what may happen. Little Free Pantries are a way to refocus on what’s happening in our own neighborhoods and draw us back into community.”

They also offer food to people who may be falling through the cracks. People in need may not be using the Food Bank because of misconceptions about who it’s for and who can use it. Others may not want to register or fill out paperwork. And still others might simply need some snacks today or a quick meal next week, just to get through a rough patch. By being completely open to anyone at any time, the Little Free Pantry creates inclusivity, fosters compassionate action and promotes real, tangible community-building.

Ingrid Carmean, a volunteer and the property owner hosting the Little Free Pantry, wanted to find new ways to give back to her community.

“Often people walk by my house, and some could be in need of a little extra food,” Carmean said. “So when I heard Compassion Clallam County was planning Little Free Pantries as part of their Food For All program, I offered my yard.”

Mounted on a sturdy pole, with a plexiglass door for easy viewing and to protect the food from the elements, the Little Free Pantry is ideally located for pedestrians, and nearby parking makes it easy for those driving by to pull over and take or donate food items.

Some initial concerns were voiced about having enough food readily available, but Compassion Clallam has been able to help stock the Little Free Pantry and, as its presence becomes known, neighbors and community members have stepped in to make sure something is always there.

“Many of my neighbors have contributed, and there is always something left by those who make use of the food,” Carmean said. “The model of ‘take what you need and give what you can’ works very well.”

Other community organizations also have stepped up to support the Little Free Pantries project. These include the WSU Clallam County Extension’s Community Health and Food Access program, which works on many overlapping issues and offers logistical and technical support, and the Port Angeles Farmers Market, which is co-hosting a “builders day” event March 7 to rally market-goers and volunteers in constructing three more Little Free Pantries for local

nonprofit host sites. These partnerships have helped Compassion Clallam ensure that the Little Free Pantries are being implemented safely and legally. This is particularly important with regard to the Good Samaritan Act, which protects good-faith contributors and recipients of donated food, and what kinds of foods are being donated.

Already, the idea is catching on fast. In Port Townsend and Neah Bay, individuals and organizations have installed their own versions of the Little Free Pantry. As the concept becomes more popular and the trust and compassion being built within the community strengthens, Compassion Clallam will be looking for more hosts and sites to install pantries so people living all across the Peninsula and beyond might have uninhibited access to good food in their communities.

Benji Astrachan is finishing a one-year AmeriCorps VISTA service term at the WSU Clallam Extension office in Port Angeles as the coordinator for various food security and access projects. He is excited to continue work in the local food systems landscape and enjoys living on the Olympic Peninsula.

The Little Free Pantries are meant for anyone who needs food, without any restrictions on income, housing status or anything whatsoever. The rule of thumb is “take what you need, leave what you can.”

Neighbors and community members are encouraged to leave food items if they are able, and Compassion Clallam has made a list of popular items: peanut butter, ramen soups, canned fruits and veggies (with easy-open tabs), dried fruit, pasta, mac n’ cheese, canned tuna, rice, oatmeal, snack bars, fruit snacks, bottled water, hardy fruits and vegetables. Please email compassionclallamcounty@gmail.com for more information and ways to get involved!