

**HAPPY AND
HEALTHY**

"I love to eat the apple first," says Makenzie Shultz, 6, a Lakeview Elementary kindergartner (after opening her backpack on Jan. 12).



HOPE *for the* HUNGRY

MILLIONS OF KIDS DON'T GET ENOUGH TO EAT AT HOME. HERE'S HOW ONE WYOMING WOMAN IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE—AND HERE'S HOW YOU CAN TOO

BY JOANNE FOWLER PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX TEHRANI

Times have never been quite this tough for Christen Melvin. Last fall the 31-year-old mom of three lost her split-level home in Gillette, Wyo., to foreclosure, returning home from her mom's place to find the locks on her house changed. Now she, her fiancé, Chris Cermak, and their three children are living with her mother; the couple cram into a bed in Melvin's childhood room while Olivia, 8, Brodie, 5, and Ryder, 3, sleep sprawled on the couch and an air mattress in the living room. While Cermak, who runs a seasonal tree-trimming business, seeks out odd jobs, Melvin lies sleepless at night, thinking about which of her belongings she can hock to keep her kids' stomachs full. "We've come close to not having anything," says Melvin, her normally bubbly demeanor giving way to tears. "It's constantly on my mind."

The grinding stress seems endless but for one beacon of hope: Tama Clapper, 35, a minister's wife and mother of four who has vowed to let no child in this town of 30,000 go hungry. She was moved to action when the principal at a local school, Hillcrest Elementary, told her that 50 children at the 430-student school went hungry on weekends—a local crisis that is playing out across the country. Today some 16 million children live in so-called "food insecure" homes where hunger is a passing or permanent part of life (see box). For Clapper, that realization was life-changing. "I

AMERICA'S HUNGRY KIDS

16 MILLION

CHILDREN IN HOMES LACKING STEADY FOOD SUPPLY

52%

OF 4TH GRADERS RECEIVE FREE OR SUBSIDIZED MEALS

21 MILLION

KIDS ON FREE OR REDUCED-COST SCHOOL LUNCH*

*SOURCE: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Dept. of Education



ONE WOMAN'S MISSION

"I can cook dinner and feed my four kids," says Clapper (in Gillette on Jan. 12), "or put in a little more time and feed 400."

had to do something," she says. In August 2010 she joined up with the Louisville, Ky.-based nonprofit Blessings in a Backpack (see sidebar). Getting discounts from the local Walmart on nonperishable staples like peanut butter, boxed mac and cheese, and canned ravioli, Clapper and her 50 volunteers go on monthly shopping runs and then fill backpacks every week. From the original 50 kids, her effort has blossomed: She now provides

some 400 children at 10 schools with enough food to get themselves—and often their parents—through the weekend. "Tama," says Carrie Boedeker-Larson, a school social worker, "has been the biggest blessing."

Despite her own stable existence—Clapper, husband Jeremiah, 37, and children Aaron, 13, Josh, 11, Micaiah, 9, and Gabbie, 6, live in a five-bedroom ranch home in the middle-class Westover section of town—she feels a kin-

ship with kids who fall through the cracks. Having grown up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, she still remembers the pain and dislocation of her parents' acrimonious split when she was 4. "I felt," she says, "not cherished."

On a recent Friday morning, however, a group of Lakeview kindergartners were feeling most important as they scrambled down the hallway, bouncing with excitement as they dove into their backpacks. "Yaaay, it's



A Town Pitches In

- 1. PICKUP** On the first Wednesday of each month, Clapper and her volunteers fill a van with packaged foods including peanut butter, ravioli, saltine crackers, microwave popcorn and instant oatmeal. Smith's, a local Kroger store, donates three cases of apples.
- 2. PACKING** The group fills backpacks in the room of a local business.
- 3. DELIVERY** Every Friday kids—assigned numbers to protect their privacy—get their packs. "Yeah, baby!" says Andre Vasquez, 5, a Lakeview kindergartner, as he opens his backpack.

A FAMILY'S STRUGGLE

"It's hard," says Melvin (with Cermak and two of their three children, Ryder and Olivia, in the house they lost to foreclosure).



peanut butter day," said Christen Melvin's middle child, Brodie, as he proudly pulled out a jar. "Popcorn! Sweet!" Adds big sister Olivia: "I love my backpack. It really helps our family."

That such need exists in Gillette, an energy boomtown with an unemployment rate of 4 percent, seems puzzling at first glance. But the jobs are often short-term, and paychecks come and go. J.R. Gadd, 43, who moved from Tennessee for a construction job at a power plant, earned a good living for eight months; then the job ended, and he and girlfriend Tammy Miller, 40, had to drain savings to pay the bills. "Plenty of times I've said, 'It's either food or rent,'" says Miller, a part-time housecleaner and mom of four. "Getting that backpack meant we were going to eat."

That's all Clapper needs to hear to know her all-consuming mission is worth the effort. Having cut back on her babysitting work, which helps supplement her husband's income, she has devoted upwards of 20 hours a week to meeting with school officials and Walmart managers, organizing fund-raisers and getting community groups onboard. One

school became two, then five, then 10; her goal is 15 in Gillette and surrounding Campbell County. "Feeding kids is simple and inexpensive—it's so easy to help," she says. "And when

they open those backpacks, they know someone is behind them whispering, 'You're important.'" ●

With reporting by Janine Rayford

Blessings in a Backpack

People
FIRST



Stan Curtis,
founder.

Few people understand hard luck better than Stan Curtis. Abandoned by his parents and raised in an orphanage, the Louisville, Ky., native put himself through college, became a successful stockbroker—and vowed to give back. In 2004 he founded Blessings in a Backpack. With a full-

time staff of four, the nonprofit partners with retailers like Walmart, Meijer and Kroger in 39 states. The stores provide discounts on nonperishable items such as mac and cheese and canned ravioli while volunteer leaders like Clapper organize shopping trips and fill backpacks. Anyone can adopt a school or group of children in his or her own hometown. The result? Every Friday some 55,000 hungry elementary-aged kids across the country go home with a Blessings-filled pack. "I believe," says Curtis, 62, "in giving people another chance."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Donate a backpack. **2.** Give just \$80. That's enough to buy a year's worth of food for one child. **3.** Get involved: Adopt a child or school in your hometown or help Tama Clapper with the Gillette schools. **Go to blessingsinabackpack.org and follow the PEOPLE FIRST buttons.**