

CommonCall: ‘Now they are our kids’

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TYE—On night patrol, Officer Jay Strong grew accustomed to unusual sights.

“A city changes at night when the vampire people come out—the ones you only see after dark,” he said.

However, nothing prepared Strong for the horror he witnessed outside a busy truck stop in Tye, a small community a few miles west of Abilene.

He saw a teenager digging through a trashcan. While that drew his attention, it didn’t alarm him initially. Then he saw the 14-year-old boy begin to eat food scraps he found in the garbage.

Responding to needs

The police officer took the young man into the truck stop, bought him a snack and asked why he was scavenging.

“He told me: ‘My parents go out every night, and there’s no food in the house. ... I think my dad loves the bottle more than he loves me,’” Strong recalled.

Strong gave the teenager a ride home. In the weeks that followed, he and his wife, Debra, began taking food to the boy’s house on a regular basis.

Eventually, the young man and his family moved away, and Strong moved on to other jobs—first as a school resource officer in nearby Merkel and then back to Tye as chief of police.

In his new role, he learned about another situation that demanded attention—a single mother who was caring both for her own children and the children of her incarcerated sister. The woman was working a minimum-wage job, but she was having trouble paying her utility bills and providing for the children.

Again, Jay and Debra Strong took on the responsibility of helping the struggling family meet basic needs—often on their own and sometimes with the help of the manager at a local truck stop who donated meals.

“Before school started, I took a little girl shopping for clothes at the mall,” Debra Strong recalled. The child told her it was the first time she ever had shopped at a store other than a supermarket or discount center.

Connecting with Tye Baptist Church



Jay Strong, chief of police in Tye, keeps donated pairs of winter gloves in his patrol car to distribute to homeless children and teenagers he encounters. (Photo / Ken Camp)

One year ago, Pastor Bill Murphy at Tye Baptist Church invited Strong to

speak to his congregation on a Sunday morning to raise awareness about child abuse and neglect.

“At that time, our Child Protective Services cases were off the charts, averaging a couple a day in a town of 1,500,” Strong said.

He described the needs in the community and his vision for addressing at least one problem—providing a daily meal for children during the summer who receive free or reduced meals during the school year.

“We didn’t know about some of the things going on right in our neighborhood until he told us about the needs of the children,” said Linda Parsons, a member of Tye Baptist Church and former Tye City Council representative.

After Strong spoke, the church collected an offering to help start a program to feed children in need. They also elected a committee to provide volunteer leadership for what soon became Operation Brown Bag.

‘Let’s feed those kids’

The next morning, Murphy called Strong and asked him to drop by his office at church.



Volunteer Nancy Moore and Pastor Bill Murphy from Tye Baptist Church sort and stuff food bags for children in their community, meeting needs through Operation Brown Bag. (Photo / Ken Camp)

"I thought: 'Uh oh, I'm in trouble. I talked too long. I said something I shouldn't have said,'" Strong said.

Instead, the pastor handed Strong a check for about \$2,000.

"Chief, let's feed those kids," Murphy said.

Soon, other individuals and businesses in the community and the surrounding area began contributing to Operation Brown Bag.

"We planned to feed children three or four days a week in the summer. It turned out to be five times a week," Debra Strong said. "The Lord blessed us with money, and we opened our bank account with about \$7,000."

Volunteers began assembling food bags at Tye Baptist Church, and Strong would deliver many of them himself.

"I pull up in a police car at a house. Instead of running away, the kids run out to see me. They can't wait," Strong said.

Operation Brown Bag began by serving 17 children during the summer, and it has continued to grow. At the end of the summer, the women at Tye Baptist who had been assembling the food bags asked Strong if the program could be expanded to provide students with food for the weekends throughout the school year.

"This is a great group of people here, and I learned these ladies are

persistent,” he said.

Making a difference in the community

Ongoing contact with at-risk children in the community provided Strong access to homes that otherwise would have been closed to law enforcement.



Volunteers Nancy Moore, Sammie Donaldson and Linda Parsons work at Tye Baptist Church to sort and stuff food bags for children in their community, meeting needs through Operation Brown Bag. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“As a police officer, it has changed the way we are viewed by these families. Before, the parents of some of the kids were my best customers,” he said. “Now, we have eyes and ears all over town. I call the kids my hawks. They know if they see something, they need to say something. It’s like our own little crime watch.”

Since Operation Brown Bag launched last May, Child Protective Services reported a 43 percent decrease in their caseload in Tye. Strong noted a drop in every category of criminal offenses during the same time.

At the same time, the community also has grown to view Tye Baptist Church in a new light.

Months ago, 27 members of the congregation—which typically draws 60 to 70 worshippers on Sunday morning—attended an evangelism training event at Wylie Baptist Church in Abilene.

They returned to Tye with a renewed commitment to knock on every door in their community and meet every family, asking their neighbors if they could pray with them about anything.

“The focus of our church became the kids in our community and their families,” Murphy said. “The focus is not on us and ours. It’s about Tye.”

‘Think about how Jesus treated children’

Members of the church volunteered at a back-to-school event sponsored by the city. They also made the church facility available when Debra Strong, associate dean of the Texas Tech Health Sciences Center’s School of Pharmacy Abilene campus, and her husband needed a place to provide children with vaccinations.

“It’s all about, ‘What would Jesus do?’ Think about how Jesus treated children,” Strong said.

The women at Tye Baptist keep Strong’s police car stocked with hand-knitted winter caps and gloves he can give to children in need, as well as bags filled with hygiene items and snacks for homeless people.

‘A safe place’

Families in Tye began to identify the church as a “safe place” for their children and themselves, where they would be accepted and not judged.

“They may not fill the pews, but the church’s influence is felt all over town. People know it’s a place where they can go for help and not be hurt,” Strong said.

On the Sunday before Christmas, Murphy baptized nine people, including five members of one family. Overall, the church baptized 24 new believers last year.

Since last May, members of the church and the community as a whole have grown to view at-risk children in a new light.

“At first, people would ask me, ‘How are your kids doing?’” Strong said. “That changed. Now they ask, ‘How are our kids?’ All the children in Tye are ours. Now they are *our* kids.”

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