



From left to right: North Gwinnett Co-op's leadership team includes Mary Warren, Kristen Mullin, Kim Phillips and Kim Barry.

MANY KNOW North Gwinnett Co-op as a community food bank, but it's so much more than that. The co-op offers tutoring services, adult education courses, medication and utilities payment assistance, as well as their Second Blessings Thrift Store.

With its recent expansion, which celebrated the grand opening with a ribbon cutting on Oct. 8, the co-op doubled in size, growing from 6,100 square feet to just over 14,000 square feet. The expansion allows the faith-based nonprofit to serve the community in a bigger and better way, increasing their footprint and increasing the number and types of services they are able to provide.

We recently had the opportunity to sit down with Executive Director Kim Phillips, who has more than 20 years experience with nonprofits and will celebrate her sixth year at North Gwinnett Co-op in April. Phillips discussed the details of the expansion and how North Gwinnett Co-op is working to bridge the gap for people in our community.

Tell us a little about your background and your role at North Gwinnett Co-op.

When I got out of college I landed my first nonprofit job that I stayed at for just shy of 20 years. I guess the nonprofit world kind of gets in your blood. When I took a year off to be a mom and then started looking for work I was looking at some of the bigger nonprofits in Atlanta — my daughter was getting ready to start kindergarten, my son was getting ready to start middle school. I just kept praying that the Lord would find the right fit for me. I knew it was out there, it was just a matter of timing. I found out about this job on a Sunday, sent my resume on Monday, interviewed on Tuesday and got the job on Wednesday. I actually took the job in my church parking lot on the phone. It was very fast. I was really excited about the ministry they did here and being so close — my kids attend school here in Buford. My parents are aging, so I'm caring for my parents full time as well. I knew that we

needed to be close to here. It was just God's plan.

My charge here when I took this position was to make it bigger and better. So we spent a lot of time in the first year building relationships with the schools and people in the community, increasing the number of people in the community who receive service, and increasing the number of people who know about us. We changed a lot of policies when I started that allow us to serve more people and make sure that kids aren't hungry and seniors aren't hungry. We've had tremendous growth since I've been here in both clients and supporters. And we accomplished this [with the expansion].

We wanted to do it all in the right order, and I feel like we've done that. People know that they're safe to come here and that we're here to serve them and be of service to them and now we have the facilities to do it in. We used to do food for families once every 60 days, and it's just not enough for a family, so we really wanted to

increase it to once a month. Now we have the space to do it in which means we need even more community support to help us keep the shelves full because people will be coming more frequently.

What is the mission of the co-op?

We're a faith-based nonprofit. Our focus is on serving people. We offer utility assistance and medication assistance to people in need. We offer clothing through our thrift store. Our thrift store is also open to the community so we generate revenue out of that store and that helps us serve our clients. The money we generate through the store goes into the checkbook that we write checks out of. Last year we earned about \$90,000 in the store, between that and our eBay sales, but we gave away over \$220,000 in assistance. So I tell people it kind of softens the blow to the checkbook for us.

The food is our biggest wheelhouse and we're trying to increase that now. We know that a lot of families

depend on the schools to feed their children, so in the summer we do a program called *End Summer Hunger* where we ask people to donate funds to us so we can buy fruits, vegetables and meats. Food banks aren't known for nutrition; it's all shelf-staple stuff. So we want to be able to offer the fresh lettuce and fruits and vegetables and some meats that are a healthier choice during the summer. The families can come twice a month for groceries in June and July. This summer we did 50,000 pounds of food in just those two months — so we're quite busy.

For the holidays, our families can sign up for a holiday meal box, which means they get a holiday meal that's literally in a box. They get all of the sides for a holiday meal — they get one for Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's the sides plus a \$20 gift card for the perishables. Last year we did about 1,500 meal boxes.

We also offer tutoring for the kids we serve. We do that on Monday nights. That's part of the expansion. We're at capacity right now

with close to 50 children in a small space. So this allows us to expand in that classroom, plus it brings us the computer lab. We'll also use those two components in our adult education and resume and interview classes that we do.

We're partnering now with Good Samaritan of Gwinnett. We will be their first satellite clinic. It's another ministry that serves the uninsured. So it's similar to a quick clinic and we'll be able to refer our clients there, and we have a fund set aside to help our clients receive services. We also help pay for medication.

The last two fiscal years we've spent more money on medications than we have utilities. The Gwinnett population is aging so quickly that it's really impacting our community and we do have clients making a decision every day whether to eat or take their medications. We're trying to remove those barriers so they can eat and take their medicine.

Our biggest demographic is children. Last year we served over 16,000 people, 39% of which were children. Seniors were 25% and that demographic is growing every year.





Can you share some details of the expansion?

The main goal was to increase the pantry size so that we could serve families once a month instead of one every 60 days, and our pantry has now doubled in size. The other purpose of the expansion was that we needed space for our tutoring program. We are really at capacity with that program and we have a waiting list. Plus, the kids really need computers. Our tutors were bringing in iPads and it just wasn't working — it was difficult to help them in the way we felt we needed to, so the computer lab will be very helpful to them.

The adult education courses — the resume and interview coaching classes that we do — will also benefit from the computer lab. The library is a great resource but not everyone has a computer at home. Nowadays most jobs you apply for online and a lot of our folks need help walking through that process. One of the first classes we'll be doing in 2020 is for our seniors to help them learn about food stamps to make sure they're getting their food stamp benefits. Another class we'll have in 2020 is a finance class, so if we assist someone with a utility payment, we will require them to take some classes on finances before they're eligible for any future utility payments. I tell people that my goal is to teach people not to need me.

The capital campaign also includes expanding the thrift store in spring of next year so we can take

in some furniture items and some more baby items for our families. The campaign also includes the loss of income in the store for the couple months it will be closed during the expansion. It includes paying off the note for that building. And it includes a reserve fund. So by the time we're finished with everything we'll be debt free — that's our goal.

Just because we're a nonprofit doesn't mean we have to look like it. I wanted people to feel special when they come in, to feel loved. I wanted it to be a place that wasn't institutional — I wanted it to be top-notch for them, they deserve just as much as anyone else. That's what we were trying to achieve — to show clients how much we appreciate them and to honor them. Yes it's pretty, but there was a purpose behind the pretty.

What are the most in-demand food pantry items?

A lot of people don't understand that food stamps only pays for food, so it doesn't pay for toilet paper, laundry detergent, dish soap — things that are basic household supplies. Laundry detergent can be expensive if you're on a very fixed income so we try to keep those things in stock. Personal care items are needed, too. We struggle with having Depends for our seniors. Ensure as well — a lot of our seniors could benefit from that. We always seem to have a lot of peanut butter, but we very rarely have strawberry jelly. We

Second Blessings Thrift Store will undergo its own expansion in the spring.

usually have a ton of grape jelly, but no strawberry jelly. We also need canned fruit, other than pineapple, and spaghetti sauce. We have lots of pasta noodles but nothing to make with them. You could feed a family for a couple nights off of a pot of spaghetti, so it goes a long way and we like that.

What else would you like the community to know about the co-op?

We really are more than a food bank. That is what we do, but we do so much more. People think we serve the poorest of the poor, and we absolutely do that, but not all of us have a huge savings. Our society isn't good about that nest egg. We recently had a professional whose spouse's cancer had returned and it had decimated their savings. We helped them get through that. I tell people we're all a minute away from needing help. That's why we always want to be respectful to people. We're all so blessed that we're not in that place right now, but we could be tomorrow.

We serve your neighbor, we serve people at your church, we serve people who go to your kid's school. We're here to bridge the gap. People donate their money to us and it's our responsibility to be a good steward with that money.

The North Gwinnett Co-op is located at 4395 Commerce Drive in Buford. For more information about the co-op as well as volunteer and donation information, call 770-271-9793 or visit NorthGwinnettCoop.org.



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