



Rice plus Project

Volunteers dedicated to help the needy families in Monterey County

Press Release

World hunger has been the main news topic during the past few days. While food shortages affecting 35 million people around the globe are of great concern, we should also pay attention to the families who are hungry right here in Monterey County. The Rice plus Project provides an opportunity for local involvement in this critical human issue.

For Release: Immediately

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The Rice plus Project Story: A vision that began many years ago

It's a story of a group of dedicated volunteers, led by a woman who followed her vision more than 16 years ago. The story follows a trail of rice and beans that make their way every month from Sandhya and Ramesh Kolar's home in Carmel to needy families in the farm communities of Monterey County. It's the story of the Rice plus Project, a local non-profit organization that feeds, clothes and supports people in our midst who lack the necessities of life.

The Rice plus Project story includes the help of Roco Gonzales who came to Watsonville from his native country, Mexico, in 1966. Working long hours in the fields, he was able to earn enough to feed his four children and helping his younger siblings and his mother make a life in their new country. In 1999, he proudly became a U.S. citizen. For 20 years, he has operated his own small business, leasing land with a partner to grow raspberries.

Farm Work is Scarce While Prices Have Risen

But Gonzales knows that many of his fellow immigrants are not as lucky. Many of them, recent immigrants who are seasonal workers in the fields of Monterey County, cannot feed their families or pay rent for basic housing. Farm work has been scarce in the past few months, while prices for food, fuel and housing have risen sharply.

Roco Gonzales feels obligated to help those who are less fortunate. Often needy families come to his door in the tidy complex where he lives with his wife Domitila and young daughter Joely. They leave with packaged bags of rice and beans, sometimes also canned goods, cereals, nuts and dried fruits, and other basic necessities, such as blankets and jackets in the winter months.

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Every month, Gonzales receives these emergency rations from the Rice plus Project. In a neatly kept ledger book, he records every pound of food, every blanket or item of clothing and names of each recipient family. At first there were 30 of these families, recently they have grown to more than 200.

"Things are getting worse in the farm worker community," says Gonzales. "Cities are taking away substandard but affordable housing and it is difficult to find new places for these families.

"The percentage paid for food and gasoline has gone up, so people can't save for down payments for homes. More people need assistance now. Two-adult families have to work very hard to make it but still live check-to-check during the winter time."

Gonzales adds that he could use a lot more of the free food to give away each month. He and his family are happy that they can help the community through the Rice plus Project. "We can offer valuable time and people are truly grateful for the food." He also likes the direct connection he has while giving away the food, he can check in with people to see how they are doing, saying, "I feel like I am between God and the people who need help."

The Rice plus Project story also includes Herb Aarons, president of California Coastal Rural Development, a community development financial institution. He provides agricultural and small business loans in the Central Coast region and is well acquainted with the struggle of local farm workers.

Direct Person-to-Person Commitment

Aarons has been a volunteer of the Rice plus Project since its beginnings and serves as an active Board member. He joins the group of volunteers every first Sunday of the month when they pack up to 4,000 lbs. of rice and beans into small plastic bags.

"I like the direct person-to-person commitment," says Aarons about his longtime support of the Rice plus Project. "We provide an unquestionably necessary resource of food for this population. We know where all the resources go and can contribute to meaningful alleviation of hunger."

Aarons likes the lack of bureaucracy at the organization. And as a professional in the financial field, he appreciates that all donations are used in an efficient and effective way, with all money going to the target group and no overhead kept by the organization.

"The essence of the Rice plus Project is to provide people with food, and to do few things for many people." He brings his wife and teenage kids whenever they have time. He is happy to make room for this project in his busy life. "You get back as much as you put in."

The group of about 45 volunteers, from all walks of life and in all age groups, who show up at the Kolar home every first Sunday of the month includes many other devoted supporters. Some, such as Eileen and Stephan Georis, small business owners in the Monterey Bay area, are among the newcomers. For four months now, they have skipped church on Rice plus Sunday and instead spend two hours with their sons William, age 9, and Aaron, age 7, to bag the rice and beans. Sitting among groups of people measuring and bagging the food, they say that this work helps to teach their children spirituality in a less abstract way.

Teaching Children about Helping Other People in a Practical Way

"We like to contribute our time as a family with the Rice plus Project because it's a way

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to teach our children about helping other people in a practical way. Working to help provide food for needy families in our own community reminds us of how much we have to be thankful for and makes spirituality more concrete, understandable and alive.

After the food is bagged by the volunteers, it is distributed with the help of contacts in the community, such as Roco Gonzales. Another longtime helper is community activist Nancy Costello, an energetic octogenarian who picks up the food in her sturdy truck and delivers it to her longtime contacts, mostly in South Monterey County.

Another Rice plus Project commitment is to donate hand-stitched baby blankets and newborn clothing to Natividad Hospital's Mother/Infant Unit. "Often it's one of the few things moms will take home for their babies," says Sandhya Kolar.

Despite the generosity of volunteers and occasional donations by local service organizations, the Rice plus Project has not been able to meet the increasing need among the county's needy families during the recent months. But Sandhya and Ramesh Kolar count on the kindness of others, never giving up hope for a happy ending to their story, every month of the year.

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The Rice plus Project is a registered 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization. Local residents can participate by helping to package rice and beans once a month and by making a donation to ensure sufficient food supplies for the project.

What your tax deductible donations will buy:

A truckload of rice--\$1,300

One set of school supplies--\$30

Food for 1 family for 1 month--\$65

One blanket--\$20

One 50-lb. bag of rice for 200 meals--\$22

Attached: Rice plus Project 2007 Summary



Roco Gonzales, his wife Domitila, daughters Joely (left) and Elizabeth Herrera in their Watsonville home.