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The hunger to help

Food program began with a dream to feed all

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Mark E. Manus, a bear of a man with a heart just as big, would have mixed feelings today if he saw his creation.

He'd smile over the growing number of people being fed, and the long list of volunteers making it work, and the family members who've replaced the energy he once had for the project.

But Manus, a deeply altruistic man who died from cancer 20 years ago, thought we'd be further along with respect to hunger. He didn't believe his Holiday Food Basket Project, which later morphed into the Capital Region Food Program, would be needed for this long, or at least not to the extent that it is today.

He thought we'd eventually have hunger under control. He thought we'd have it licked by now.

"I think he would be bittersweet," said Manus's daughter, Maria Manus Painchaud. "He'd be proud and happy (the Capital Program) can do the work that it does, but sad that it's necessary. He would have thought we would have been in a better position and we could have beaten hunger worldwide."

Still, the hungry who are cared for here have people like Manus and, today, his family to thank.

Manus formed the Holiday Project in 1974, back when he owned Mark E. Ltd., a clothing store on Main Street. He helped feed people at Christmas before the cause branched into a year-round idea, the Capital Program, which now sponsors the Holiday Project.

The two food organizations spend about \$130,000 combined annually, and most of the money, about 80 percent, comes from private donations. Food for the Holiday Project is bought from Market Basket and then distributed through satellite offices and delivery.

Food for the Capital Program comes from Associated Grocers in Pembroke, a retailers cooperative that also sells to grocery stores, large and small. More than 30 local food pantries fill their shelves during the

Capital Program's 10 annual distribution dates.

And the recent numbers released by the Capital Program are stunning. More than 1.8 tons of food was distributed in September. More than 35 tons is donated to partner agencies, the pantries and churches, each year, covering 18 local communities.

"We have a cadre of incredibly talented individuals who commit time to this organization," Painchaud said. "They believe in the mission. There are young people and elders, and second generations. I remember when they were toddlers and they came with their parents, and now they're in leadership roles."

More than 1,000 people volunteer for the Holiday Project. Twenty cover the year-round work of the Capital Program.

Painchaud's husband, Steven, is the vice chairman of the Capital Program. Her two children, Elena and Mark, also volunteer.



VERONICA WILSON / Monitor file
Volunteers with the Capital Region Food Program move food at Market Basket in downtown Concord for the nonprofit organization's annual Thanksgiving distribution in November 2008.
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But Painchaud, thanks to her father, is the poster girl for this effort. She's a 53-year-old business teacher at Southern New Hampshire University, with more degrees than a thermometer. She is also deeply ingrained in the Concord landscape.

Her mother, B. Andrea, who died last year from breast cancer, produced benefit musicals with the Concord Community Players to raise money for the Holiday Project.

Her grandfather owned the Sterling Restaurant on Main Street and began feeding the needy 60 years ago, well before Manus launched his humanitarian ship in 1974.

Manus, known as Mr. Main Street, ran his clothing store from what is now Rowland Studio. He was a city councilor whose barrel chest belied his caring nature. Painchaud's eyes widened when asked about him.

"He had a strong sense of right and wrong," she said. "He was an advocate for the underdog and a champion for those who needed help and who needed a voice."

He was diagnosed with kidney cancer in 1989, "on Feb. 2," Painchaud remembered. He died May 16, at 65, but not before leaving his imprint on his three children.

"My father was always committed and made sure us kids recognized that we had an obligation and duty to give back to our communities," Painchaud said. "If we have the resources and we have the talent and we have the skills, it is our responsibility."

Painchaud acted quickly after her father's death. She created tight guidelines and formal policies, details Manus never bothered with. And she declared that the Holiday Project would forever remain all-volunteer, with every cent going toward the purchase of food.

The Capital Program was born in 1992. Painchaud credits the late Marty Elkin, former CEO of Elkin Coffee, for daring to help the hungry all year long.

The Capital Program remains vibrant today. Painchaud's two children volunteer when they're not in their college classes.

"Both are taking leadership roles," Painchaud said. "They've been involved since they were toddlers, whether it was putting a can in a box or other things. The kids have done every aspect of the Holiday Project."

That's her father's baby, a vision he founded 35 years ago. And, with the temperature dropping each day and pumpkins smiling everywhere, the Holiday Project soon kicks into gear.

"This was the part that my father was so visible with," Painchaud said. "It has a lot of meaning for me."

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