



Harry Chapin Food Bank
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

KIT BOX 32
42 BOXES
7/11

Angel Hair
DE LALLO
Spaghetti
Kraft
macaroni & cheese
APPLE & CINNAMON
APPLE & CINNAMON
WITH OTHER NATURAL FLAVORS

HEAVY
CHEM

SERVICE

is in her Blood

THE JOYOUS EFFECTS OF POSITIVE CHANGE
DRIVE KARI LEFORT'S LIFE MISSION

When she was in her teens, living in the Boston suburb of Billerica, Massachusetts, Kari Lefort's family home served as a refuge for women facing crisis pregnancies.

"These women truly had nowhere to go," Lefort says. "So, my parents would take them in and help provide for them — not just until after their babies were born, but for up to six months afterward."

Her family had the room — she is one of only two children — the means, the determination to help and, most importantly, the faith that they could make a difference in the lives of young mothers who needed them.

"My parents were involved in the Assemblies of God church," Lefort explains. "In fact, my mom was a teacher who later became a pastor, and my grandfather was a pastor. There were some social workers in my family, as well."

Even at a young age, service was an important component in Lefort's life, and the young women cared for under the family roof were a major influence on her.

That influence steered young Kari toward a career in helping others.

"Living with these women was eye-opening. I learned how incredibly challenging it can be to survive in a world without the kind of familial support — both financially and emotionally — that I had," she says. "Helping them

Undaunted: Kari Lefort, Harry Chapin Food Bank's director of programs, is driven to make a difference in the lives of others.



STORY BY STEPHANIE DAVIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATE LANE :: NATELANEPHOTOGRAPHY.COM



Between her bachelor's and master's degrees, Kari Lefort, right, spent two years serving AmeriCorps.

Lefort describes the AmeriCorps experience as "unforgettable."

and their babies taught me the value and the importance of giving back."

Lefort, now 41, has been the director of programs at the Harry Chapin Food Bank of Southwest Florida for six years.

"Friends sometimes make fun of me because I can't turn off my passion for what I get to do," she says with a laugh.

Indeed, when she talks about helping people, she does so almost breathlessly, with an infectious smile in her voice.

"When I was still in high school and my family was housing women who were in crisis pregnancies, it gave me a unique insight into how people can fall into poverty," she says. "There are so many different reasons for people being in crisis — it's not just one path."

In a country where many believe that folks who are struggling should pull themselves up by the bootstraps, finding young people who not only want to commit themselves to a life

of serving others isn't always easy. But Lefort's understanding of generational poverty and her desire to make a difference in the lives of others have been with her since her formative years.

When it came time for college, Lefort left New England to visit a friend in rural Missouri, where she was introduced to Evangel University, a private Christian university in Springfield. She says that going from near Boston to the wide-open spaces of Missouri was an adjustment, but it helped her focus on her studies. She graduated in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in social work.

She knew there was so much more to learn, but before she went after her master's degree, Lefort needed a break. Tapping into her spirit of adventure, she joined AmeriCorps, the national community service organization that bears the slogan, "Be the Greater Good." It was a perfect fit.

"At first, I was stationed with a team in the Southeast," she explains.



"While we were there, we got to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. The variety of experiences was really amazing. They team you up with nonprofits, so you get to do everything from tutoring elementary school students to helping build trails in state parks. It was a great way to learn, but also to have fun. I ended up doing two years with AmeriCorps. It was unforgettable."

Meanwhile, her parents had moved to Fort Myers, where her

mom became a Christian education pastor. So, when it came time for Lefort to pursue her master's degree, she chose Florida State University in Tallahassee.

"Social work was what I wanted to do. But rather than one-on-one clinical work, I knew that I wanted to do something to affect systemic change, which meant I needed to focus on social policy. FSU offered a program that fit perfectly."

After earning her master's, Lefort made her way back north, where she worked with Catholic Charities of Boston, as well as a homeless shelter, honing her skills on program development. There, she wrote grants, worked with volunteers and advocated for community education.

She loved the work, but Lefort was intrigued when her mother told her about an open position at Harry Chapin Food Bank in Fort Myers. Lefort loved the idea of being closer to her family, following her passion of service and being close to the beach. ("I've shoveled a lot of snow in my life," she laughs.)

Some of the programs Lefort oversees at Harry Chapin include the Care and Share Senior Feeding program, Harry's Helpings, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Fulfill Mobile pantries, in-school pantries and the Harry Chapin Partner Agency program, a network of more than 150 partner agencies in five Southwest Florida counties.

"I'm inspired and motivated every single day to know that we're feeding 28,000 people a week."

As a for-instance, Lefort says, "Whenever I'm at one of our mobile food pantries and just knowing that I've affected someone's life that day — that a family will have food on their

table that night — it makes me want to work harder and to do more."

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for a number of nonprofits in Southwest Florida. But when it comes to feeding the hungry, Lefort says the Harry Chapin Food Bank is seeing many more people than they used to.

"So many people have lost their jobs, especially in the service industry," she says.

"COVID started here at the beginning of March, which is when many folks make the money they need to save for the leaner summer and fall months. So, all of this has been particularly tough."

Though she gratefully acknowledges a number of generous donors, she says the food bank's needs have increased by 40%.

Still, nothing daunts her.

Lefort doesn't dwell as much on the need as she does finding ways to better attend to the plights of people in need.

When she's not at work, Lefort says she loves exploring Southwest Florida. Currently single, she has a network of good friends who have always enjoyed nights out at Florida Repertory Theatre and art happenings in downtown Fort Myers.

As she looks toward the future, Lefort says she'd love to stay in the Sunshine State, and more than anything, she wants to continue a life of service — of helping others — just as her family did in her formative years.

In many ways, you could say it's a family tradition.

"I can't see myself in any other field," Lefort says.

"Making a difference, effecting change and giving people the help they need will always be my passion. It's in my blood — and it's what gives me joy." ❁

mission...
to lead
our community
in the fight
to end
hunger.

Harry Chapin Food Bank

Kari Lefort's nonprofit of choice is, of course, the Harry Chapin Food Bank and its partner agencies that feed about 28,000 people every week.

The agency's clients include children, families, seniors and veterans who may have just lost a job or be underemployed. They may be battling illness, struggling on a fixed income or dealing with life-changing circumstances, such as divorce or the death of a loved one.

The Harry Chapin Food Bank's mission is to lead the community in the fight to end hunger. Visit <https://harrychapinfoodbank.org> to learn more.

