

# A Green Bag, a Community, and a Simple Idea



"You just have to make it easy. People are very generous, and if you make it simple, they will help." This is Bob Schnapp's guiding message, and it ripples through his grassroots-led food collection effort, *A Simple Gesture - Reston* (colloquially named *Cool Green Bag*). Inspired by a project initially conceived in Oregon that spread throughout the country, *Cool Green Bag* emerged both from Bob's social consciousness and an overall trend in American society towards community-led activism. Versions of the program exist around the country, but Bob spearheaded a Reston-based campaign that uses an eye-catching signature: the green bag. Any Restonian can sign up at [www.coolgreenbag.org](http://www.coolgreenbag.org) to receive their free green tote. Six times a year, team members come to the home to pick up the groceries that have been collected over the previous months—and that's it! Bags can be filled during shopping trips or during kitchen clean-outs, and some of the most-needed items include tuna, cereal, soups, rice, and beans. The rest of the work is accomplished by dedicated volunteers who shuttle the food bags to pantries across the area, including Cornerstones and St. Anne's Episcopal Church, both in Reston. "It's really heartwarming—people really do just want to help," Bob says, echoing the sentiments of others that ally with *Cool Green Bag*.

One of those people is Tim Barwick, the Minister of Outreach at St. Anne's. With an assured tone, he notes that "...everyone is busy, but this is something everyone can do. It's a win on every front." Tim and Bob collaborate by coordinating donations of food from *Cool Green Bag* to St. Anne's food pantry, and Tim's glowing review of Bob's "outstanding organizational skills"

speaks not just to the positivity of those involved, but to the ways in which people from different parts of our community unite to work hard for a shared cause. Indeed, the connections between various organizations and institutions around Reston are staggering. St. Anne's works on food distribution and other outreach projects as a way to promote interfaith alliances: they collaborate with the Shoreshim Jewish



Congregation in Reston and the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS). They also involve non-religious organizations, such as the Embury Rucker Shelter and the Lake Anne Fellowship House. Watching the dots connect to and from pantries, cultural centers, faith organizations, schools, and homes is inspiring to see in a community that has always made volunteerism part of its identity.

At South Lakes High School, these threads weave even further into the fabric of the community. Roberta Gosling, a coordinator at the South Lakes High School PTSA Food Pantry—where food from the green bags is sometimes collected—calls the intersection between Cool Green Bag and her program “a great symbiotic relationship.” There are roughly 730 students on free and reduced lunch plans at the high school, and Gosling—along with other like-minded volunteers—understand the importance of gathering food for low-income families to use during breaks and holidays. Roberta notes that it is “...easy to get caught up in the problems of the day [but] at least once a week, I am blown away by people’s generosity to volunteer and give back.” Roberta, Bob, and Tim emphasize creating bonds through giving, but Roberta articulates one part of the job that is particularly special: “It’s amazing to connect with the students and families who are recipients at the pantry.” [www.facebook.com/SLHSFP](http://www.facebook.com/SLHSFP)

*A Simple Gesture* was also an attempt to ease one of the major problems that both schools and food banks encounter: shortages in the summer. Bob was struck by the fact that pantries often see a decline in donations during that season, so he devised a year-round solution that ensures local pantries have supplies coming in on a regular, planned basis. Since its inception in June 2015, the program has collected an astounding 171,906 pounds of donated food. The cheer in relaying this number is infectious in Bob’s voice, and the principle behind *Cool Green Bag*—utter simplicity—is hard to ignore. Bob believes in finding “something that moves you,” and when in doubt, Roberta urges all reluctant volunteers to dive in head-first: “Pick something you think you might be interested in, decide how much time you have, and literally just jump in!”

***And if you do decide to jump in...don't forget to bring your green bag (and a friend) with you.***



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