

# One in a *Ver*Million

## Meet Matt Hodges

By David Lias  
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While snowstorms have graciously skipped the Vermillion area for the most part this winter, a blizzard of sorts is going on at the Vermillion Community Food Pantry.

Thanks to the giving spirit of the community and of USD students, over a ton of donated food items have arrived at the facility, located in Trinity Lutheran Church, in recent weeks.

Matt Hodges, a non-traditional student who lives in Vermillion and is studying accounting at Mount Marty College in Yankton, is one of a host of volunteers that helps bring order to what can best be described, at times, as a chaotic storm of donated items.

"My wife was down here finishing up on her master's program, and we lived in Leola originally," he said. "So

I moved down here to finish up school. This is my last semester - I graduate from Mount Marty in May."

Matt's involvement with the Vermillion Food Pantry began last September and was prompted, in part, by one of his classes.

"In my sociology class, you had to write a 10-page research paper or do 18 hours of community service, and I decided on the community service," Matt said, laughing. "I had already arranged to do my community service here at the food pantry, and I finished up my 18 hours ... and I wanted to get it done and over with."

By mid-October, he had reached his class' community service requirement. "But I just never quit," he said. "I enjoyed it so much. It's kind of stress reliever, and it's away from school, so I continued on. By the end of the semester, I had 50 hours

in working here, and I continued over Christmas break. Like a bad penny, I kept turning up here, and I've probably put in over 80 hours here since September."

Some days, extra help tags along to the food pantry with Matt - his son, Lucas.

"He came over one night, and he enjoyed it right off the bat," Matt said. "He comes along with me every Tuesday night that he can, depending on whether he has pep band those nights at school. So Tuesday nights, this has sort of turned into a father-son thing."

Matt, Lucas and other volunteers at the Vermillion Food Pantry have had no trouble finding things to do lately. Employees at Sanford Vermillion recently completed a food drive and presented a \$1,000 monetary donation to the pantry.

The Downtown Vermillion Action Team also recently held its annual "Change for Change" campaign, which raised \$600 for the Vermillion Food Pantry.

USD's Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) has also help collect needed food items. Fans were encouraged to bring canned food items to the USD vs. SDSU women's basketball game on Monday, Feb. 13. Canned food collections were also held before the Thursday, Feb. 9



LUCAS AND MATT HODGES

USD/SDSU men's basketball game at the DakotaDome.

Recently, USD student athletes worked with the Vermillion Middle School and launched their local campaign and collected over a ton - specifically 2,380 pounds - of canned food. They also visited the students in a casual format during their lunch periods to discuss school, competing in athletics and the canned

food drive.

After the food was delivered recently, Mary Berglin, director of the Vermillion Food Pantry, and volunteers like Matt and Lucas organized and sorted the various food items so they may be efficiently distributed to people in need.

"Yesterday, I came in with the goal of getting the various donations all stocked on the shelves," Matt said Friday morning, Feb. 10. "So by noon yesterday, with the help of the other volunteers who were here, we got everything separated by dates and then placed onto the shelving in the storage area. We're waiting for the next challenge of food that will be coming in, and I think that will be coming in either today or Monday."

"It is very challenging," he added. "But it's a lot of fun. We sort everything by date first, to make sure that none of our food items have expired. It's a fun challenge, and the other volunteers I work with here are so much fun to be around."

Matt views the food pantry as a grocery store, and the people who need its help are customers.

"The only difference is there is nothing of monetary value exchanged," he said. "I see these people every month, and I've gotten to know quite a few of them that come in. I know their

likes and dislikes."

Sometimes, items that don't fit into a "traditional" food pantry package are donated, such as olives, oysters or sardines. "When they come in, I'll usually ask my customers if they'd be interested in those types of items, and many times they say 'yes.'"

Matt enjoys being part of an organization that fills an important role in the Vermillion community.

"The need is definitely here," he said. "It's not going to go away for awhile. We're breaking all kinds of records. I didn't think, when I started working here, that the food pantry served as many people as it does."

"The numbers are just amazing to me," Matt said. "In the month of August, we served 408 people, and, to me, for a town of 10,000, that's a lot. And our numbers went from 3,200 in 2010 to 4,000 last year. The need is becoming greater, and it's due to this recession, and we're coming out of it, but it's going to take a long time."

The Vermillion community's response, he said, is amazing.

"The people are very giving both in food and in monetary donations," Matt said. "If it wasn't for the public support, we wouldn't be able to serve the people that we do."

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