

**SUUC Pre-Centennial History Update #1  
November, 2017**

**An Appreciative History of The Corner Cupboard**

Corner Cupboard's beginnings are now the stuff of legend, but for those who have not heard the story I hope its retelling will be of interest. Throughout 2005, our minister was growing increasingly overwhelmed by requests from local families desperate to make ends meet, so when toilet paper began disappearing from our bathroom facilities on food kitchen days, Rev. Sue perceived a need and saw an opportunity to provide non-food staples from an outlet not then available in Sanford.

An exploratory meeting was held on December 5, 2005, in Rev. Sue's office, attended by Jo Dill, Jackie Belanger, Bev Brent, Bill Lotz, Evelyn LaBree, Helen Kane, Janet Goba, Melinda Josiah-Geaumont and Janie Waterhouse. Other meetings were held in quick succession, when we were joined by Judi Reis, Ruth Leipold, Gail Burnett and Betsy Tyrol. Overwhelmingly, we were of one mind: to provide non-food necessities not covered by government agencies in a dignified, non-discriminatory and hassle-free environment to anyone needing a helping hand along the way. Goodall Hall would be our base of operation, and we would be open on the third weekend of each month at a time when household finances and supplies might be running low.

But first, we needed a name that would incorporate our mission. From all our suggestions, Melinda's was the obvious choice: The Corner Cupboard Non-Food Pantry, "Corner Cupboard": succinct, catchy, and right on the mark for our church on the corner.

Then came the hilarious assembly of the first of our three cupboards, with a somewhat less-than-perfect outcome, but quite adequate for our purposes. When the next two cupboards went up, it was with the able assistance of Bill Ouellette, John Steffens, Fred Brown from Springvale Hardware, and a lesson or two learned from our first endeavor! Fittingly, the cupboards themselves were gifted in memory of Vernon Smith, Liz Perry's husband, who had recently passed away.

In the meantime, a storage area was being prepared in what is now our library in the basement, where risers from long-forgotten stage productions took up half the room. Never phased by even the most onerous of tasks, our intrepid Bill Ouellette quickly "disposed" of them, making room for the floor-to-ceiling shelving that would hold our non-food pantry supplies. Now all we had to do was find the money to stock those shelves on an ongoing basis.

A 2005 Christmas Eve Service special collection provided the seed money for the grand opening, which took place over the weekend of Friday, February 17, 2006, from noon to 1:00pm, and Saturday, February 18, from 10:00am until noon. The 30 families who were our first shoppers could choose between 8 and 10 items from a list of 37, ranging from toiletries, personal care products, paper goods, cleaning supplies and diapers, to dog and cat food, batteries and light bulbs. The hours of operation were adjusted slightly after the first few months, and soon thereafter it became more practical to confine our open hours to one day, the third Saturday of each month, from 10:00am to 2:00pm, which has served us well ever since.

Corner Cupboard was established as a 501-(c)3 non-profit organization, and we sought donations through local charitable agencies, extensive advertising, church members, friends and relatives, and any other resources we could think of, including the first tentative grant applications bravely tackled by Rev. Sue, one of which realized a large supply of diapers.

Our "tenacious ten" committee began meeting mid-week following each pantry opening to assess results and address needs for the coming month. Potluck suppers quickly became the focal point of our meetings which usually took place in Goodall Hall, sometimes in members' homes, and occasionally poolside, a tradition that continued for many years until in-person gatherings were no longer deemed necessary. Twice, we went on retreat to fine-tune our objectives and write down our method of operation for future volunteers to follow. We were a committed, co-equal, like-minded group who enjoyed each other's company while working together from our individual strengths, in a spirit of integrity and respectfulness, to accomplish one important goal: to keep Corner Cupboard open for as long as there is a need for its existence.

There was a lot of lugging going on in those early days! Good Shepherd in Auburn saved huge amounts of non-food items for us, which meant 3-5 people going to fetch it, including Rev. Sue, who did yeoman's work. The returning drivers were greeted by others helping to unload, unpack and shelve on this end. Anyone with a suitable vehicle was pressed into service, which is how Dave Leipold's truck became our long-time go-to vehicle, and his more-than-willing hands saved many a day.

Jo and I filled endless shopping carts with goods bought in bulk from the local Dollar Tree, which Bill Ouellette transported back to the crew waiting at church. Jo and Jackie often went further afield to Reny's and other Dollar Stores that came to know our needs and strove to meet them.

I well remember Mickey Robichaud and Ruth Ridley gallantly assailing the back stairs, answering the never-ending demand for supplies from the nether regions below, as word of Corner Cupboard's existence spread and its number of customers increased. Clearly, it was a system much in need of revision to save further depletion of our collective energy. Providentially, the logical solution was at hand: by moving the library-behind-the-curtain next to Mona's office to the downstairs storage room we were able to clear ample space for stock room shelving in Goodall Hall, thus bringing the entire operation on to the same floor and into one room that could be secured behind a locked door replacing the curtain! And this is where Paul Poyant and Ian have presided over the supply center ever since, aided by a succession of others over the years - Ginny Howe, David Agan, my grandson Josh, Aiden Quinn, Marcel Gagnon and Bruce Couture among the many.

For ten amazing years Ruth and I, as the most senior of our group's citizens, got to SIT at the check-in tables, along with a third stalwart that has included Evelyn LaBree, Aileen Fortune, Melinda's mother Laura Josiah, and Janet Wood. Together, we battled the unwieldy paper-trail binders until our prayers were answered in the form of two computers gifted from David Leipold. Then, by introducing erasable shopping tablets we virtually eliminated paper altogether, in keeping with our "green" values. Now, only Ruth and one other computer-savvy youngster like Kelli Ames continue to hold the fort, while Paul Poyant is our go-to IT specialist.

From the beginning, the committee struggled with the concept of offering gently used clothing but, given the obvious need, we have committed to providing a seasonal supply, which has evolved from a somewhat jumbled pile resembling Filene's basement to a well-organized, continuously-folded presentation in Rachel Hanson's caring hands, a standard built upon by succeeding volunteers.

Likewise, our household goods tables grew from an assortment of odds and ends to two large tables of housewares and children's toys and books from which shoppers can choose a few items, depending on availability. For several early years Blair Colquhoun presided over what became known as "Blair's tables," followed by others like Robin Nielsen, who did a wonderful job engaging with customers, and now Dee Ames is capably at the helm.

Which bring us to the "heart" of our third-Saturday-of-the-month operation, the pleasant person who stands at the inner door and bids a warm welcome to our customers, many of whom have stood in line, perhaps in extreme weather, and are glad to come inside. Judi Reis heads the list of these greeter/facilitators, together with Bev Brent, Aileen Fortune, Marcel Gagnon, and numerous other notables.

Friday set-ups are another aspect of the Corner Cupboard's operation that may well be unfamiliar to many. From about 8:00am to 10:00am some very committed people prepare the clothing, household and sign-in tables in readiness for the next day's shopping event. Ruth, Bev, Tom Gagne and Phil Berube are the regulars who accomplish this task, together with David Agan and Kristie Prashak.

The educational and empowerment aspect of our operation evolved as a place for other area agencies to disseminate helpful information. Representatives from York County Community Action, Sanford's Adult Literacy Program, The Community Action Health and Dental Clinic, Caring Unlimited, Women's Wellness and others shared their programs, information and resources during the early years. SUUC's Social Action Committee's "Living Well on Less" flyers and other brochures with topical information have offered ways for people to improve their quality of life.

Another of our early efforts was a series of power-point talks given by several members of our committee to local philanthropic organizations to make them aware of the Corner Cupboard's existence and mission. An example of the fruitfulness of such outreach is the Lion's Club of Acton and Shapleigh, which continues to donate \$200.00 annually.

Of course, funding is the key element to the continued success of our operation, which costs from \$800.00-\$1,000.00 each month to sustain. Our first fundraiser was selling T-shirts and bumper stickers proudly proclaiming our slogan - Gandhi's words: BE THE CHANGE YOU WISH TO SEE IN THE WORLD, which realized \$368.00. We received contributions from private donors, individuals and businesses, and some money from FEMA to buy diapers in all sizes, one of our most appreciated items. Students from Sanford High School chose Corner Cupboard as their charity in 2015, when Rev. Sue and three members of the committee attended a ceremonial presentation of their generous \$1,000.00 check. Tom's of Maine was very supportive, as was Children's Dentistry of Sanford, which gave us enough toothpaste to last for years!

Our own efforts at fundraising have run the gamut from candlepin bowling, to yard sales, craft fairs and dinners, but our signature success for many years was the annual (and later semi-annual) silent and live auction spearheaded originally by Jackie and Jo, who showed us how it was done. These were elegant affairs with lovely items offered for bidding by memorable auctioneers Marcel Blouin, Melinda Josiah Geaumont and Marcel Gagnon. There was always plenty of good food and fellowship, Jackie's chocolate fountain being a highlight for several years. I have a fond lasting memory of Jo and Jackie's friend Karen Littlefield, who attended our auction just weeks before her impending death, happy to be there to make a substantial contribution. Money from the auctions was turned over to our church, which then donated \$2,000.00 annually to Corner Cupboard.

This is a good time to introduce you to Jo's cousin Sandy Hunter and the many other members of Jo's extended family who adopted the Corner Cupboard as their place to give--in spades! These lovely ladies sewed, knitted, shopped and baked to their hearts' content, bestowing upon us an embarrassment of riches, from full-size quilts to tiny babies' outfits and all manner of "goodies" in between. We are forever grateful for their immense generosity over many years. Jo herself left Corner Cupboard in 2015, simply performing too much volunteer work to sustain. She was given the Spirit of Service Award by the United Way of York County for her nearly ten years of dedication to Corner Cupboard, and promptly donated the \$500.00 honorarium to our

non-food pantry. Jo remains on the periphery of our mission, but we miss her vibrant presence. Jackie was similarly generous to Corner Cupboard with the gift of \$1,000.00 as her chosen charity.

Let me share some other highlights, starting with the Kempers Award given to our church in 2007 by the Faith in Action Committee of the Northeast District Office of the UUA for "innovative Social Justice work in [our] community," which hangs proudly in Goodall Hall, together with a photograph of the presentation at the Allen Avenue UU Church in Portland.

Knowing that Christmas is not always a happy time for those in need, Jackie and Jo shopped tirelessly throughout many years for the holiday gifts that culminated in a dazzling display in the church parlor, where our customers could choose presents for everyone in their family.

Similarly, when bargain school supplies were readily available at Staples, we bought in bulk, and arranged assembly lines to fill as many back-to-school backpacks as were needed, until "Stuff-the-Bus" offered a similar service that made us redundant.

The Quinn family cooked and presented a number of delicious meals, which they served to our guests in the parlor, a noteworthy contribution recently repeated by Kael and Natasha Nolan Parker.

Ever looking for an opportunity to "go green," Judi and Bev devised a way to accomplish several things at once by making large quantities of an all-natural cleaning solution, buying spray tops to affix to customers' returned empty plastic bottles, then discounting these with free refills against the maximum number of customer items allowed - brilliant! No matter what the task, Bev Brent, "our lady of the hats," brings her lightness of being to all our endeavors, and she is a constant source of strength and encouragement.

It was Judi who devised a plan to "Blanket the Community" in the winter of 2008, which resulted in so many hundred donations from within and beyond our church that storage became a "problem!" How heartwarming it was to think of the comfort those blankets were providing on mid-winter nights!

As you may have surmised, Judi Reis is the person Rev. Sue called our "unsung hero." A benign presence among us who sets a benevolent tone for all that is best about Corner Cupboard, Judi is known for her genuine friendliness, boundless energy and infectious laugh. Until quite recently, Judi had quietly assumed the four or five "administrative" jobs previously shouldered by Jo, altogether too much for one person to handle, and time to break up the tasks into manageable portions. Enter Dee Ames, whose initial trepidation at staffing the Corner Cupboard soon grew into confident competence in a position she obviously enjoys. Ann Andrew also stepped in to pick up and deliver the orders from Family Dollar, while Marty Walton does the ordering from Dollar Tree, which Bill picks up. Peg Sawyer is the latest of our financial secretaries, following in the footsteps of Jackie Belanger and Judi Reis. The latest addition to our committee is the delightful Nancy Mercier, who has made it her mission to find "cat litter for everyone - even without a cat!" Now that's a spirit we encourage and appreciate! Special mention must be made of Ginny Howe, who is at Corner Cupboard almost every month, filling orders and doing whatever needs to be done. She also makes sure that the packaging supplies, tape, scissors etc. are available in the storage room.

It has been said many times, but cannot be emphasized enough, that Mona and Bill Ouellette are about as close to indispensability as is humanly possible! With grace and humility, they have facilitated every aspect of Corner Cupboard's operation since its inception. Quite simply, we do not know what we would do without them, and our gratitude is boundless.

There was a time when people came from far and wide, a clear indication of a dire need for the help it took much gasoline to obtain, but the demand is more localized today. At the height of the recession years as many as 250 families sought our assistance, leveling off to around 150 today. We hope this is an indication that

life has improved for some of our earlier customers. Ruth lights a candle of concern at each of our third - Sunday-of-the-month church services for those who attended our pantry the day before.

It takes a minimum of eight volunteers to "man" the Corner Cupboard efficiently, three or four of whom provide customer service at the front tables, cheerfully filling orders and packing items into ever-fewer plastic bags as we find ways to provide reusable carriers. Many have served in this capacity over the years, people like Vicky Morgan, who didn't let chemo sessions keep her away, and Marlene Parent, a church member from many years ago. Vicky Lynn, Elaine Gagne, Kristie Praschak and Catherine Violette are among the "regulars" today who follow in the footsteps of Diane Whiteside-Peck, Linda Bates, Patty Kidder, Gail Burnett, and Jan and John Steffens. The sign-out book from the past twelve years is filled with the signatures of those who have volunteered, for whom the reward lies in being of service to others. We know who they are, and they have our enduring gratitude.

So far as I am aware, we have always been able to keep our doors open on the appointed day, except for a possible postponement or two, a remarkable achievement when one considers all the possible impediments! Perhaps now you can better appreciate our mantra from our monthly opening huddle: CORNER CUPBOARD ROCKS!!

Helen Kane





