

a Young Adult

Food bank director loves focus of his work

Story by Rob Cullivan

ELMIRA — Paul A. Hesler, 34, director of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, has a simple motivation for overseeing the collection and distribution of food for the poor.

"On a personal level, I love food," Hesler said during an interview in his office.

The Rome, N.Y., native added that his mother was a baker, his stepfather a chef, and that he himself had worked in restaurants and loves to cook, as well brew his own beer.

Then again, Hesler did confess to deeper motives for pursuing his work, part of outreach efforts of Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, a regional office of diocesan Catholic Charities.

Hesler worked in the development office at Cornell University in Ithaca earlier in the decade. While he enjoyed his work and thought he wanted a future in the academic world, potential aspects of a college career bothered him.

"My goals were to get a Ph.D., and become a dean of students or a vice president of student affairs," he said. "I started to have some conversations with recognized leaders in that field. It became apparent to me that the time they spent with their careers meant they spent little time with their families."

Knowing he wanted a family someday, Hesler — who married last summer — began considering other options for his professional life. He said that he had begun taking his Catholic faith more seriously when he attended Ithaca College and Syracuse University in the 1980s, and that his faith kept growing throughout his 20s.

As Hesler's faith grew, so did his desire to respond to what he perceived was God's call to do something different with his life.

"I asked God, 'Where do you want me to be?'" said Hesler, a parishioner at Holy Cross Church in Dryden. "The answer to me was that I wanted to make a difference in people's lives."

Since that point in time, Hesler has devoted his life to working for the church, first as business manager at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Ithaca, then as the founding director of Catholic Charities' Tompkins County branch office, also located in Ithaca.

"We started off in July, 1997," he said. "We started with a cell phone in my bedroom. That was our office for six weeks."



Two years later, just before Hesler left to take on his new position as director of the food bank, the Tompkins office could boast the establishment of the Samaritan Center. The center provides emergency assistance to those who need everything from cash to pay the bills to clothing for their children.

The office also offers a mentoring program that matches employed citizens with people seeking to leave welfare for work, he said, as well as other programs.

In August, Hesler became director of the food bank, which he said will distribute an estimated 5 million pounds

of food by year's end. The food bank is supported by the federal and state governments as well as private donors, including local Catholic churches. It serves pantries, soup kitchens and feeding programs within and outside the diocese, in Broome, Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga and Tompkins counties, as well as parts of northern Pennsylvania, Hesler said.

Hesler said the food bank has seen its demand increase dramatically in the past few years. He noted that one study of the Southern Tier estimated that it would take 15 million pounds of food to meet all

the current demand for assistance. He added that, contrary to the image of unemployed people standing in bread lines, only 30 percent of the people who are helped by agencies linked to the food bank are unemployed.

"Hunger in this country, for the most part, is fairly invisible," he said. "Well-groomed people who are working have a need to access programs. There's a decidedly good chance that somebody standing next to you on an assembly line or working down the hall is accessing a food program."

As Hesler saw it, the problem comes down to a lack of good-paying jobs in the Southern Tier in an era when the state government is pushing people off the welfare rolls.

He added that many people who come to food banks lack the skills and education to make it in the nation's increasingly high-technology economy. Hence, people who might have been on public assistance before are now turning to the private sector for help to make ends meet.

Hesler also pointed out that he is concerned about the future because there's such a huge demand for donated food now when the stock market is doing relatively well.

"If we experience hunger now, what's it going to look like when the market inevitably goes the other way, because this can't last forever," he asked rhetorically.

No matter what the future, Hesler, who said he grew up in a low-income family, is ready to use his skills and education to continue what he sees as a ministry.

"I think, in some strange way, I've been thrust back into the very environment I came from to give back," he said.

Events

Unless otherwise indicated, for information on these upcoming events, call the hotline for Odyssey, the diocesan-sponsored young adult network, at 716/328-3228, ext. 375, or 1-800-388-7177.

◆ **Friday, Nov. 5:** Bowling night at Ladd's Bowling Center, 873 Merchants Road, Rochester.

◆ **Saturday, Nov. 13:** Joe Gorman of Career Development Services will speak at an interactive workshop on work skills in Corpus Christi School

at Blessed Sacrament Church, 534 Oxford St., Rochester. 10:30 a.m. to noon. Co-sponsored by Crossroads, Blessed Sacrament's young adult group.

◆ **Saturday, Nov. 13:** Coffeehouse featuring open mike musical jam. Sponsored by Crossroads, Blessed Sacrament Church's young adult group. Call Chris Hood at 716/271-7240 for time and location.

◆ **Saturday, Nov. 20:** Rochester

Amerks hockey game. 7:35 p.m. Call hotline to reserve \$7 discount tickets.

◆ **Sunday, Nov. 21:** The Landmark Society of Western New York is organizing a bus tour of St. Michael's, St. Joseph's and St. Stanislaus churches in Rochester. 1-4 p.m. Meet at the Landmark Society, 133 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester. \$10. Limit of 40 people. RSVP to Landmark Society by Wednesday, Nov. 17, at 716/546-7029, ext. 10.



A Rockin' Halloween Charity Bash

For ALL young adults (ages 21+). Presented by the Catholic Courier and Odyssey, the diocesan young-adult network.

Friday, October 29 • 8 p.m. to midnight

Top of the Plaza, 1400 Midtown Tower, Rochester

\$10 tickets include music, finger foods and prizes. Cash bar available.
Costumes optional. Best costume prize to be awarded.

100 percent of proceeds benefit the Catholic Courier/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal, a year-round fund for individuals and families needing emergency assistance.

For tickets call Odyssey at 716-328-3228, ext. 375, or 1-800-388-7177, ext. 375 or the Catholic Courier at 716-328-4340 or 1-800-600-3628