

For release: August 15, 2019

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IN A SMALL TOWN, COMMUNITY IS KEY

BALLANTINE, MONTANA – Rita and Doug Oltrogge never sought to change the world, they just wanted to help kids who needed a meal or a place to go after school. Little did they know that their Ballantine United Food and Lunch Box would become a community-wide program of neighbors helping neighbors.

Fewer than 350 people live in tiny Ballantine, part of the Huntley Project irrigation district. Most work in Billings, some have several jobs, and many live in trailer courts where rent is more affordable. Though they might get by, many have little extra for school supplies, day care, or high heating bills. That's where the Oltrogges and the congregation at Ballantine United Church of Christ come in—they work with local churches, businesses, and individuals to take care of each other. Since starting the program in 2015, they have served some 17,000 meals. Volunteers also deliver food boxes to the homebound.

"It's the community," Doug says. "The community stepped up, and we kind of direct it."

What Doug and Rita started as an afternoon snack program for school children has grown into a complete community meal. The church also provides a social outlet for seniors and anyone who "needs the community support, just to talk and deal with issues," according to Rita.

Students receive box lunches, backpacks, and school supplies, as well as a comfortable place to do homework or play foosball. In winter, hats, coats, and gloves are provided, and folks who can't afford high heating bills are directed to programs that provide needed assistance, such as Energy Share. When a family's car broke down beyond repair, a van was donated. Help was given a family who lost their house to fire, the child of a sick parent was sent to camp this summer, and "there's a lady on oxygen; we stop in and visit her," Rita says.

"In any community you see the issues we see. But what do they *do* when they have these issues?" she asks. A strong network of volunteers creates a backbone for the program, Rita says. "All of the local churches help," Rita continues, noting that many businesses and organizations provide support. These include the Lion's Club, Salvation Army, Billings Food Bank, Billings Breakfast Exchange Club, Family Services, Yellowstone Valley Electrics Operation Roundup, the Gianforte Family Foundation, and the Billings Community Foundation. "All funds stay local," Doug notes. "There's no distance between the donor and the person in need. It best serves the community that way."

To continue meeting everyday needs, the Oltrogges are raising money to stabilize the 114-year old church roof, to eliminate rain and ice and buildup at the entryway to the food program and dining area. "Any money we get, anything, helps everyone," Doug says. Sometimes, he notes, "We work hard keeping the lights on," but "it will flourish."

Born in Ballantine, Doug says, "We know each other. It's a community." He adds, "We're at the stage of life where you look to repay the community. It's one of those things you don't turn your back on."

For more information or to support the program, contact Rita Oltrogge at 406.855.5166.