

2015

## Access of West Michigan: Promoting Food Equity through Storytelling

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Bowman, Kaitlyn; Corr, Matt; Saye, Zoe; Timmerman, Rebecca; and Witham, Guy, "Access of West Michigan: Promoting Food Equity through Storytelling" (2015). *Undergraduate Research*. 11.  
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# **Access of West Michigan: Promoting Food Equity through Storytelling**

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## **Abstract**

Personal accounts addressing real-life experiences are a testament to humanity, and allow future generations to act and improve upon them. Currently, large cities are facing malnutrition and are often labeled “food deserts” (Walker et al., 2012). While restaurants and convenient stores are bountiful in large cities, the variety of food they offer is not. Access of West Michigan is an organization providing workshops, simulations, and programs to educate the general public on the importance of health and nutrition. In the present paper, we address the challenge to further educate and inspire community members to get involved and allow Access to provide to those who need it, the access to healthy, nutritious food. A montage of testimonies from participants or staff members alike will demonstrate Access of West Michigan’s successful aid, as well as a glimpse of real, true-life experiences of fellow community members. Future consideration should further implement the goal of said testimonies by conducting live interviews or hosting a poverty simulation at a local institution.

## **Introduction**

“Food deserts” are a significant problem in many urban centers. “Food deserts” are areas where there is little availability of nutritious food and people, particularly poor people, have difficulty locating places that serve or sell nutritious foods (Walker et al. 2012). Many charitable organizations exist to help combat these societal ills. Access of West Michigan (Access) is one such organization that provides workshops, simulations, and programs to educate the general public on the importance of health and nutrition.

Evidence of cave drawings dating back thirty thousand radiocarbon years ago suggests storytelling is in our very nature (Balter, 2008). This essay chronicles the efforts of a student team to support the primary goals of Access: to educate and inspire community members to get involved and to improve availability of healthy, nutritious food. The student team produced testimonies from participants or staff members to showcase successes from Access’s programs and provide a glimpse of true-life experiences of program participants. The intent of the testimonies was to inspire participation from the community. In the future, another student team could raise awareness by conducting a live interview with an Access manager as a program on the WGVU radio station. A future student team could also work with Access to host a poverty simulation at Grand Valley State University and produce testimonies from participants to highlight the benefits of the simulation program.

## **Food and Poverty Issues**

Many of the people living in “food deserts” cannot afford cars,

making it even more difficult for such individuals to locate healthy foods. These financial constraints result in food insecurities. This is when a household experiences a lack of nutritious food availability due to low-income. In America a significant minority of households experience food insecurities at some point during the year. A sample of 2,952 houses interviewed showed a 12% prevalence of food insecurity (Nord *et al.*, 2008).

Approximately half of the households that experience food insecurities use programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The main goal of these programs is to provide food to those who are financially struggling. However, much of the food that is donated to food pantries is not nutritious, but rather “empty calorie” food. This can result in an “obesity paradox” where many low-income food pantry patrons end up with preventable dietary illnesses like obesity and diabetes. While it is easy to think that these problems are simply the domain of the poor, a wider view of the issues documents how it is detrimental to society as a whole. In recent times, many charitable organizations have begun to recognize this problem and now begin to implement new models to combat it. Access of West Michigan is one such organization.

## **Access of West Michigan**

Access of West Michigan (Access), is a group of faith-based and community leaders founded in 1981, who coordinate community resources to eliminate hunger and reduce the impact

of poverty in Kent County. In order to help families in need, they created centralized programs to ease the burden of those struggling financially. They play a unique and important role in the community by linking those in need with those who can help. They value collaboration, partnership and working together creating a stronger force to reduce the impact of poverty in the community at large.

### **Access of West Michigan: Programs**

Access strives to achieve their goals through delivery of educational workshops and programs. One program is the N.O.W program (Nutritional Options for Wellness). N.O.W. serves those who cannot afford expensive, healthy foods pertaining to diseases they have. Criteria for a referral are those 18+, low-income, and diagnosed with a chronic disease (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, renal disease, COPD, or celiac disease). Primary care physicians refer eligible patients to the N.O.W. program for a one-year term. The patient is presented with several health education happenings and once they attend, the N.O.W. team assigns the patient to a food pantry based on the individual's location. The patient is served diet-specific items each week at the pantry and must complete six hours of health education each term. If the patient successfully completes the six-month term requirements they will be eligible for another term. Access provides the pantry and pantry coordinators with one-on-one support.

Access also offers the Hunger Response Program, which is food security programming that consists of a network of 75 coordinated food pantries with 13 pantry resource centers to cover all of Kent County. This program works with local farmers throughout the

community to try and bring local, nutritious foods into the pantries.

In the article, *Soup Kitchen Meals*, Sisson and Lown (2011) discuss the needs of nutritious foods in soup kitchens to support nutrition requirements. Our soup kitchens today are surpassing the daily amounts of energy-dense foods needed, but falling short of nutrient dense options. This is also true of many food pantries. "Food insecure populations consume diets of inexpensive, low-nutrient-dense foods, high in fat and added sugars and low in vegetables and fruit, resulting in overweight and obesity" (Sisson & Lown, 2011). Therefore, these meals are not helping those in poverty. By serving unhealthy options food pantries are further promoting obesity, which can contribute to chronic illness causing higher medical bills and pushing people further into poverty.

The Access Hunger Response Program Director concurs and when asked how good nutrition and ending poverty go hand in hand, she says: "The landscape of poor nutrition helps perpetuate poverty. Agribusiness promoting bad, cheap, and easy food targeted toward people in poverty cause them to develop diseases that further push them into poverty. The presence of good nutrition would be a poverty alleviator and would help in its reduction considering poverty has a lot of issues within it" (Personal Communication, October 2015). Addressing the double burden of malnutrition, Raj Patel, in *Stuffed and Starved* states, "In every country, the contradictions of obesity, hunger, poverty and wealth are becoming more acute" (2008).

With the 'Food Gods' dictating what we see on the shelves of our grocery stores, it is difficult to decipher

what is good and what is not anymore. There are 23 different names for sugar that are used on ingredient lists to avoid writing “sugar” as one of the most prevalent ingredients. However, these foods are some of the most affordable foods for those who struggle to feed themselves and their families. It is hardly surprising then, to see that these types of foods are also the most common within the food pantries. The “Big Fat Contradiction”, however, is that these foods are so high in sugar that just a few hours after eating them people begin feeling hungry again; people return for more of these foods, which in turn aids in an addiction to sugar (Moss, 2013). It is a sad, vicious cycle of poor nutrition that needs to be broken. The student team hopes their actions will contribute to a positive shift toward the access of nutritious foods throughout the local community and, in the future, the global community.

### **Access of West Michigan: Goals and Needs**

After holding an interview with the Poverty Education Coordinator and the Hunger Response Program Director, the student team identified a list of needs and areas to improve Access of West Michigan. One of their challenges is food quality. The organization representatives would like to increase the nutritious quality of food available through food pantries. However, often the public donates food of poor nutritional quality or food that they would otherwise be throwing away. Access believes that it is important to educate people to donate better quality food.

Another major challenge Access is facing is simply making others more aware of their presence and

mission. Specifically, Access of West Michigan would like to appeal to the younger generation and focus on bringing attention to the foods that are available in food pantries. The name “Access of West Michigan” has lost recognition over the years and their mission would be better served if community awareness were increased.

A third challenge for Access is event programming. Access of West Michigan is known for large events such as their annual Hunger Walk. While honoring their historic events, they also wish to pursue events that bring in local food sources and sustainability education.

Identifying previous events and programs in the past and improving upon them increasing public awareness, promoting positive community involvement in pantry donations, and developing more sustainable, forward thinking models to achieve social change are Access’s most pressing goals at present. The vision for Access is to be a catalyst in the community, to see it thrive, and in areas of disparity, to build equity and equality.

### **Project Ideation**

After interviewing the Access staff, the student team conceived three ideas that could provide the biggest benefit for the organization: advertising, a mobile food pantry, and testimonials.

A major problem facing Access is a lack of community awareness of their mission. Testimonials from the people who actually work at Access would be a simple yet efficient method of helping to solving this. This not only gives the general public information about what it does for the community, but it also gives relatable real-world examples of how Access accomplishes positive change. The idea is for each

group member to interview a staff member of past or present participant from each program to inspire future participation, show the benefits of participation, and relay real life experiences to the public increasing awareness and eliminating the hesitation of potential participants to get involved. The testimonials could be placed on the corresponding program page within the Access website, or perhaps added collectively as an entirely new feature on the Access website. A potential drawback to this idea would be the inability to get volunteers to offer up their personal stories for public viewing.

Direct advertising for Access would help to promote awareness of the need to donate healthy foods, to increase name recognition throughout Kent County, and could promote community involvement through news broadcasting, magnets, and flyers. The main drawback to advertising for Access of West Michigan is the cost of materials and availability of volunteers to distribute magnets and flyers throughout the community, as well as getting on the air at a local news stations.

The mission of Access of West Michigan is to eliminate hunger and reduce the impact of poverty in Kent County. Because the lack in availability of healthy and nutritious foods for residents in Kent County is a current present barrier, a mobile food pantry could essentially create a new means of access to healthy and nutritious food throughout the community. Providing a “pantry on wheels” would allow community residents who do not typically have access to fresh produce the opportunity to retrieve fresh local produce right outside their door. Our concept would be to partner with local farmers that may have excess produce

who would be willing to donate such to Access. While this idea would be an exciting, new and creative way to revitalize the organization’s brand there are a few rather large barriers to this proposal, such as a substantial budget for acquiring a food truck, gathering local farmer partners willing to donate excess produce, and obtaining staff to accommodate a mobile food pantry for Access of West Michigan.

### **Action Plan**

The project we chose to conduct was to collect testimonial stories from Access employees and volunteers as a means to promote availability and benefits of Access’ programs. Testimonials share actual hands on experience from program participants in order to help community members understand the benefits of participating. They will then be more likely to take advantage of the program services.

Studies of testimonials as an advertising technique show approximately a 20% increase in users for services when testimonials were added (MarketingExperiments). Video testimonials were shown to be even more effective than just text, likely because they allow the viewer to feel closer to the person reporting the success of the service. We selected the testimonial plan because it was viable for a student team, and because Access did not want to use direct marketing or solicitations. Our detailed Action Plan is included in Appendix 1.

After ideation, the student team created a template with Access of West Michigan staff input, so that the stories could be presented with a consistent style, header, footer, and section headings. The footer would include

details about how potential clients can contact Access. Depending on how Access chooses to display the testimonials (on their website or on paper flyers), the footer could include program links or phone numbers for direct contact. Our intent was to produce documents that Access could easily modify for the delivery method they chose.

Each student interviewed participants of one major program offered by Access of West Michigan, and produced a 2-3 paragraph program success story based on the template. The stories are to be delivered to Access in one Word document file with a summary page titled *Client Stories* with a brief description and links to each story.

### **Project Results**

Our action plan resulted in the generation of the five testimonials included in Appendix 2. The testimonials showcase the benefits of five Access programs. They also tell personal success stories that are intended to inspire participation in these programs both from community volunteers and those who may need the help that the programs offer. The testimonials were forwarded to Access who should proceed to add them to their website or social media sites. One of the major goals we helped Access to accomplish during this project was to update their website and improve their name recognition. We also helped them provide information that could help people in need of their services find the assistance they may not be aware of.

### **Project Challenges**

Challenges that we faced in putting our plan into action included scheduling interviews with Access

employees to get the stories and information we needed. The work schedule for Access of West Michigan employees is from early morning until the late afternoon a few days a week, conflicting with student schedules. It was also a challenge to get interesting, detailed stories that did not identify the participants in the stories. For some of the testimonials we had to use made-up names for the people involved. It was also much easier to get information about the programs than it was to get information on specific individuals. Some of us felt that the testimonials ended up feeling less personal and more information oriented than we had originally aimed for. One disappointment was that the student team has been unable to see the testimonials get uploaded to Access's website or social media feeds before the end of the semester and this writing. As a group the student team wishes they could have been more involved with the approval and distributing part of the process. The student team hopes that their work will be put into circulation and be able to assist Access's mission to improve food equity in the Grand Rapids community.

### **Future Considerations**

In the future, GVSU students could easily get involved with Access of West Michigan and take this project to the next level. If Access benefits from the publication of testimonials, as tested by this project, they could expand the use of testimonials on their website or program literature. They could also update their website to feature this information. A student team could also help Access raise awareness by conducting a live interview with an Access manager as a program on the

WGVU radio station. This could help raise awareness of Access in the GVSU community and hopefully inspire volunteers or donors for Access's programs. A future student team could also work with Access to host a poverty simulation at Grand Valley State University and produce testimonies from participants to highlight the benefits of the simulation program. The simulation program increases empathy and teaches participants about the challenges faced by people in poverty as well as the causes of poverty and what individuals can do to help create social change.

The staff at Access of West Michigan seeks to incorporate sustainable foods into their program models. In order for Access to promote sustainability and attract local farmers to donate quality foods, GVSU students or others could identify other projects that would assist in attaining this goal. For example, a student team could network with local farmers to identify sources of excess produce. Access may also pursue fundraising for a food truck or a consistent presence at local farmers markets.

### **Conclusion**

The testimonials produced can increase awareness of the programs and services delivered by Access of West Michigan, providing easy to understand, interesting, and relatable examples about how Access makes positive differences in people's lives. Access works locally to address issues that are prevalent globally, such as the lack of availability of nutritious foods in urban centers, prevention of nutrition related diseases like obesity and diabetes, and community networking to promote social change. The student team believes that Access's sustainable and

equitable charity model has elements that could be of great benefit to other communities. It is integral to the future of society that people be able to come together, share experiences, and work to face the increasingly complex challenges of modern society. Access of West Michigan is an organization that exemplifies these traits, and forms an excellent model from which to work together and build a better future for the entire world.

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## Appendix 1

### Action Plan

**Goal:** Increase the community's awareness of and involvement in Access programs.

Action Steps	Responsible	Deadline	Resources	Potential Barriers	Result
Evaluate realistic actions that a student group can accomplish within the time period	As a group, the students identify three potential activities	10/21/15	Coordinate group communication and discussion of activities	Lack of participation or response by group members can be overcome by rearranging meeting times or communication methods, or moving ahead with only participating group members. Disagreement by group members can be overcome by negotiating through discussion.	Choose a practical and useful activity to conduct.
Interview Access management representative to determine barriers and needs		10/25/15	Coordinate scheduling with Access	Availability of Access staff may be resolved by tenacity and identification of alternative staff	Clarify needs of Access and current barriers to program delivery
Identify activity to be conducted	Agreement by all student members	10/28/15	Communication between students	Disagreement among students will result in	Specify activity

	and agreement by Access staff		Communication with Access staff	negotiation until agreement is reached Access representative will approve choice of final activity	
Produce template for testimonial format		11/1/15	Microsoft Word Student authors	Adjust template until it produces the most useful story format and content.	Completed template
Interview Access staff for testimonials	Each student will interview a representative of Access program delivery staff	11/3/15	Coordinate scheduling with Access staff. Travel to meet with staff. Notetaking or recording to ensure accuracy.	Scheduling difficulties will be overcome with tenacity. Students will be prepared to take notes.	5 interviews completed
Write 5 testimonials	Each group member writes 1	11/21/15	Microsoft Word Student authors	Authors not meeting deadlines can be resolved by the student team adjusting duties Stories do not fit template. This can be resolved by being flexible or creative with the template	5 draft testimonials
Review and	Each group	12/07/15	Microsoft	Lack of or	5 final draft

edit draft testimonials	member edits one testimonial		Word Student authors/editors Email communication	delayed participation by team members can be resolved through group communication or adjusting duties	testimonials
Deliver final testimonials to Access	One group member will be elected to deliver the final product	12/15/15	Email communication	If Access staff request additional changes after student group has dissolved, the stories may not be used	5 testimonials published on Access website or fliers to increase participation in Access programs

## Appendix 2

### Five Testimonials

#### 1. Stephanie Agnew: Poverty Simulation Staff Member

Stephanie Agnew works as a Staffer for Poverty Simulations hosted by Access of West Michigan. She is a wonderful woman who continues on her journey with a positive attitude and her head held high. She is a firm believer in sharing her story, even if it doesn't seem too interesting to her, and allowing others to open up to her and share theirs. "No one knows your story until you decide to open up," she said. "If you hear about someone who went through such a struggle and pulled themselves out, its inspiring and makes you feel like maybe you can do the same." She says that through Access with the knowledge and skillset she has obtained, her motivation is to treat people more humanely and to help others be competent and understanding of those who live in poverty.

Here is a bit of her journey that she was kind enough to share with me! Stephanie had a wonderful life growing up. Her family was very supportive and loving. With much of their support, she graduated from High School, and went on to earn not one, but two college degrees. While attending college to become a CNA, she worked at Steelcase. At age 28, she found herself comfortably working two nursing jobs, however in the early 2,000s, her health started to deteriorate and she was diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes. "Unfortunately," Stephanie mentioned, "I was not taking my health seriously and in 2007, I woke up in a hospital from an incident at work. By age 42, I was told by my doctors that I would not work anymore." Stephanie went from a steady, and hardy, paycheck every two weeks, to making nearly a fourth of what she was accustomed to. With two children still to be raised, "poverty came knocking on my door and didn't wait to be let in. Trying to make money to survive and keep my two girls alive led me to make bad choices and people can smell desperation. Unfortunately my yearning for survival led me to jail—I was guilty on two account of retail fraud, but in both cases it was for food." Through much turmoil, Stephanie struggled to find housing for her and her children, further pushing her into poverty as she entered homelessness. Thankfully, through a friend, Nancy at Access was able to help Stephanie get on the right path and find shelter for her and her family once again. Although she still lives in poverty, she believes that the Poverty Simulations are extremely important and that everyone can benefit from participating, or even watching one take place. Stephanie said, "I continue to do simulations because there are always things to learn about poverty."

As we discovered more about Stephanie, we realized how important these Poverty Simulations were to her and how much they make an impact on the community as well as those who are poverty stricken. I asked her a few questions and here's what she had to say:

- What Programs have you participated in that you feel are beneficial for anyone to undergo?

-“Poverty simulations-- Each one feels like my first one. I have never heard anyone say ‘I didn’t learn anything’. Hence, something can always be taken away from the simulations while helping people realize what living in poverty actually feels like. Most people don’t fully understand what living a life like this actually entails, they have no clue what living from paycheck to paycheck even means.”

- How has Access (Poverty Simulations) impacted your life:

“Doing these Simulations has taught me to never forget people in the streets again. They present opportunities to show other people how hard it is in poverty. They exercise how to show empathy and compassion toward people who might struggle in these ways. Someone might have a steady paycheck, like I did, but life happens and your world can come crumbling down before your eyes and it’s important to be prepared.”

“If I could say one last thing about the Simulations, it’s this: I believe everybody should observe one. Our economy is still in despair and more and more people are becoming at risk of being in shortage everyday. Whether you be the one struggling with it, or a professional working with a person in despair, or even someone walking by, people who go through simulations understand and take away how to interact with low income or poverty stricken people and it gives those of us who are still fighting a community and a sense of belonging for a purpose.” –Stephanie Agnew

## **2. Brenda Nichols: Poverty Education Coordinator**

Brenda is now the Poverty Education Coordinator for Access of West Michigan. She has been in this position for two years, but had volunteered at Access for 11 years before that. Before she became the Poverty Education Coordinator, Brenda suffered many losses and hardships. In a span of three years, she tragically lost her husband and her best friend. Her daughter’s friend also died at the young age of 11, and the manager of the restaurant she worked in was murdered causing emotional strain. She had also been suffering under bipolar phases, but had not been diagnosed because people around her thought the tragedies that she had suffered in such a short period of time. During a manic period she committed a crime, and was incarcerated for 3 years. She received diagnosis for bipolar disorder after the incarceration.

When she came home after the three year incarceration, she returned to discover that she had three grandbabies. Brenda applied for many jobs; however employers would not hire her because she had been imprisoned despite her education and previous employment. She volunteered at Access, and managed to survive 10 years in poverty on the small income Access provides for their employees.

Brenda worked with Access of West Michigan for many years, and when the Director of Poverty Living left, she applied for the job and was accepted. The income that Access provided as well as the government funds appointed to her due to the bipolar disorder allowed for financial freedom after living 10 years in poverty.

Presently there is a new program introduced to Access of West Michigan called the NOW (Nutrition Outreach Workshops) program. There are 19 simulations a year that allow 1,300 people per workshop to attend. Brenda likes to ask how the attendees can help relieve the influence poverty has on the community under the premise that if everyone came up with an idea there would be 1,300 ideas of how to deal with poverty formed. There is a strength in numbers, and even if some of the ideas are the same there will still be enough variation because of the sheer numbers of them.

Within the Poverty Education there are 30 volunteers. They are assigned roles within the 14 resource tables such as bankers, DHS receptionists, the Director. They also volunteer at places like the health clinic, food pantry, police force, pawn shops, utilities, a check cashing store, and the path office.

Brenda travels around West Michigan for the workshops that she speaks at so the resources that Access of West Michigan can provide goes beyond their headquarters in Kent County. She recalled that during one of her workshops that she spoke at was a Meijer near the Detroit area, and it seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. It was a double workshop and both sessions ended up completely filled with people. It was busy, but she felt like the workshop reached a large number of people so she felt like that workshop was a success.

Personally, Access of West Michigan has helped increase her self esteem, self-worth, and provided financial security. The hardships she underwent allowed her to enrich Access of West Michigan with real world experience, and helped her relate to the other volunteers at Access.

Brenda strongly believes that educating the public about healthy nutrition will help increase the health of those in poverty. She wants to educate not only people in poverty, but also people who donate food to the food pantries, because the kinds of food donated to the pantry also affects the overall health of those receiving assistance from them.

### **3. Christina Swiney:**

Christina's inspiration for working for Access comes from her previous 10 years of working in a church setting. She loves to protect the church from someone who may be using the church inappropriately, and assisting the people who have real needs. A good day for her is as simple as having her coffee in the morning. Although even a good day can turn bad for her if she is unable to fully help someone, when it is not in her power. An example would be if someone came to her, way behind on their rent, there's no way that they're going to be able to meet the needed funds and they are facing eviction. It's overwhelming and frustrating for her to see that happen to people in need. She wants people to understand that straight charity is not always healthy. Just throwing money at a problem won't fix it, you need to solve the problem. If there is one thing that you should know about her, it is her compassion for the people who are marginalized; and this compassion is fueled by her view of Jesus and his compassion for the poor.

#### **4. Emma Garcia: Access NOW**

Access's NOW program is designed to support healthy nutrition in impoverished areas by providing education to people suffering from nutrition related diseases like diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and celiac disease. The main goal of the program is to educate participants so that they can manage their own health independently after completing the program.

An example of someone helped by the NOW program is Jessica. Jessica was diagnosed with obesity and hypertension, as a result of dietary issues in addition to being homeless. Referred to the NOW program by her doctor she took 12 hours of healthy lifestyle classes over 1 year that helped to teach her about the value of proper nutrition as well as essential health skills like how to read nutritional labels and what nutrients help to treat or prevent diseases and other medical conditions, as well as how to cook healthy food. Like other participants Jessica was put in a group with other people who have similar health problems to encourage team learning and allow participants to help each other through their challenges and to provide emotional support for each other. After 1 year in the program she was able to lose weight, get into assisted housing, and said she had a healthier relationship with her family. She credited this to the NOW program and called it a "catalyst for my improved health".

The NOW classes are taught by partnering with free educators from the community. Each month offers different classes that participants can select from based on their needs and interests. Participants are encouraged to set goals so that the program staff can help you achieve them. After attending their first class participants are assigned and referred to a food pantry based on their location, where they can get diet-specific food to help treat their conditions.

The program also helps participants sign up for SNAP food benefits. Participants can stay in the program for up to 2 years. Additionally the NOW program supports healthy eating in food pantries by focusing on produce, whole grains, dairy, lean meat, and legumes. Like Jessica, many participants may be unable to afford the kinds of healthy food they need; and the NOW program provides a way for them to meet their specialized dietary needs.

#### **5. Waverly Knight: Assistant Director of the Northwest Food Pantry**

In 2006, Waverly Knight had lost her job the week of Thanksgiving, and was looking for something to do while searching for a job. She began volunteering at Access of West Michigan's Food Pantry. After about two years of service and a life of uphill and downhill battles, Waverly is now the Assistant Director at the Northwest Food Pantry at Trinity Reformed Church.

"I can relate to a lot of the clients because I have been homeless, I have lost a job, I've had no money for food, I have had no money to pay bills, I have lived from friend to

friend to friend for about a year and a half because I couldn't afford it with a \$9 an hour job.”

Waverly Knight has graciously accepted to share her life journey that lead her to become the passionate, hard-working, and strong willed woman she is today, and how Access of West Michigan has provided a platform of possibilities for her that she hopes will have as great of an impact for future clients.

“I first came into poverty about 18 ½ years ago, when my husband of 19 ½ years had an affair and left. Our son was about to graduate high school and our daughter was fifteen. When he left so did the income, and I was a stay at home mom working part time at Kohl's while the kids were in school. Two weeks after he left I attempted suicide and I am extremely grateful that God gave me my second chance. It was a struggle of course, but later I met someone else and remarried. Less than a month into our marriage he had turned into a person I had never seen before...he was very abusive. With the help of many wonderful people I got out of that, which is when I became homeless, living from friend to friend to friend. I lived in a motel for a while, and then a friend of mine had a little one-bedroom house that became vacant and thankfully they allowed me to stay there. I saved up enough money, and some wonderful people also gave me some money so that I could move back home as I was living in Pennsylvania. I moved back in with a girlfriend, and after two months she booted me out. I went and sat in my car in the church parking lot and I said 'I'm done God.' My car was having problems and I had no money, so I was just done. I said I can't do it anymore, I don't know what to do, I don't know where to go...about 10 minutes later a friend called and asked if I was still looking for a place to live, and she said they were not going to charge me rent, they just wanted me to stay with them until I found a job, so I could save up money for a deposit to get an apartment. Then the mechanic called and said 'Oh, it's just your spark plugs', but I told him I didn't have the money. He said 'Well I'll put them on and you just pay me when you can', thankfully he was also a friend. Then I got all moved into my friends place the next day, and received a call telling me I had a full time job. Well, then I lost that job, and this was before I got remarried. 'Here we go again now what do I do?' Going through everything I went through helps me do the job that I do here today at the food pantry, because I understand what it is like to be homeless, and have no job and no food, so I understand. I can't totally relate to everybody, but it helps me understand most of them, so that's how I came to be the Food Pantry Co-Director. I deal with volunteers, getting food to the pantry, and do all the shopping for the pantry. Now I struggle financially and with a husband with Asperger's, but you know I'm still here, I have a roof over my head and food to eat, I couldn't have gotten through everything without friends. They're the ones who've got me through everything I've been through. I am so happy to give back. I do what I can!”

Waverly's wishes for present and future clients:

“Find that one thing where you can make a difference and make a difference in whatever that one thing is, cause a lot of people think, 'Oh, I don't have time', well there's always something you can do. You can go buy 24 cans of corn and drop it off at the food pantry, it's that simple.”

Waverly's words of encouragement:

"Don't give up, keep on truckin'! Things may seem really bad at the moment, but in time, because I went through all the bad stuff, it has helped me understand and help me do the job that I do today. Because of your story you will eventually help someone else because of what you went through, so hang in there when things seem at there worst, sit down and have a nice talk with God and let him know. He already knows, but let him know again because he wants to hear it from you. Turn to friends for help, don't be afraid to ask, go to the food pantry if you're in dire need, don't be afraid, that's what we're here for."