

Meet the August 18, 2018 WaterFire Orb Lighter:

Gina Gurska

WaterFire is honored to have Gina Gurska to light the ceremonial orb! As we honor those who are heroes every day by their career choice, Gina fits that perfectly as a teacher. She spent the first ten years of her career teaching 3rd and 4th grade, and became a Kindergarten teacher in her 11th year. Today she has taught Kindergarten for 16 years - the first contact these young students have with the school district. Gina took this a step further when she added to her role as teacher, the day she became aware of a way to help hungry children – a backpack program.

Gina recalls the principal at Artman Elementary, (Hermitage School District) Mr. Brian Schaller, giving the staff a newspaper that included a story about Feeding America's backpack program. She knew it was just what their school needed and worked with Brian and their Child Services Specialist, Patti Bruzzese, to make it a reality. She recalled a story of one student who went hungry all weekend, with only evaporated milk to hold him over until Monday. His last meal prior to Monday was lunch the Friday before. The program started with generous donations from the Artman Casual Club, the Artman Foundation and individuals. The school and teachers bought brown lunch bags and small snacks and packed the bags themselves. The teachers discreetly handed out these snack bags to about 40 children at its beginning in 2007. The "snack pack program" took a turn when Grace Chapel Community Church sponsored the school's program, allowing it to grow to 100 students served, and then becoming a backpack program. The Community Food Warehouse (Sharon) became a partner and food source, while the congregation at Grace Chapel Community Church (Hermitage) provided most of the finances and labor to pack the backpacks in time for the following weekend. The students received not just snacks, but meals for the weekend, in their backpacks. Grace Chapel still continues to fund and fill backpacks for the Hermitage Students and serves as the sponsor for that district.

The needs were so great in neighboring districts, that the Community Food Warehouse reached out to be a food resource for them as well. Today there are nine school districts in the area that participate in the backpack program. Overall, there are about 1000 (one thousand!) local students who receive a pack of snacks and food to sustain them over the weekend and keep hunger at bay, until they are back in school on Monday morning. The backpacks are filled with things like juice, milk, fruit, healthy snacks, cheese sticks, crackers, pudding, whole grain animal crackers and entrees. They are given to the students every weekend to take home with a double portion on the holidays.

The program has grown so much it requires a coordinator who does everything from ordering food, to organizing the many volunteers it takes to pack this food on a standing night each week. It costs \$225.00 to feed a child on the weekends for an entire school year. The backpack programs are dependent on donations from individuals, companies, churches, organizations and foundations.

"I had no idea the program had grown to another nine districts. We have the most kind, caring and generous people living in our valley!" said Gina. WaterFire Sharon agrees with you Gina, and thinks that **YOU** are at the top of that kind, caring and generous list! THANK YOU for everything you have done in making this program a reality for our area and alleviating the pain of hunger in so many of our own local children for 10 years now. On behalf of the thousands of children whom you'll never meet, and the children that will never get the chance to thank you, allow us to say "Thank You" on their behalf. **YOU** are a hero and we find you absolutely amazing!

WaterFire Sharon is honored to have Gina Gurska light the Orb tonight!

