

More Than a MEAL

**Celebrating its fifth anniversary and a new home,
the OU Food Pantry confronts food insecurity
with service and community.**

BY WHITNEY BRYEN



Four days after Christmas, Blessed Amoah arrived in Norman with two suitcases and no place to call his own. Amoah had traveled more than 6,000 miles from his home in Ghana to study petroleum engineering at the University of Oklahoma.

His job as a research assistant wouldn't start for two weeks. So, he stayed with a friend while searching for an apartment, sharing food supplemented with a couple bags of gari—dried cassava flour that, when mixed with water, creates a starchy dish similar to rice—and a bottle of hot sauce he brought from home.

His dreary outlook shifted during the second week in Norman when a friend took Amoah to the OU Food Pantry, where rows of metal shelves displayed stacks of boxed and canned foods available for the taking.

“It replaced the food and clothing and some other items that I would otherwise have to buy, so it allowed me to save that money and that's important, because as a student I'm not getting a lot of pay,” says Amoah, a 27-year-old graduate student. “I was able to rent an apartment and saved enough to buy a car because I didn't spend as much on food and basic things that I could get at the pantry.”

When Amoah started visiting the OU Food Pantry in 2020, it served about 120 to 150 students, faculty and staff per week. Now, as the pantry celebrates its fifth anniversary, that number has nearly quadrupled.

On its biggest week in 2022, 525 people sought help from the pantry, says OU Campus Care Coordinator Matt Marks. He advises student volunteers who run the program and attributes its growth to increased need and the pantry's recent move. ►



"You know that someone is going to have dinner tonight," says OU senior Nitin Rangu, director of operations for the food pantry.

Whitney Bryen

Marks and student volunteers anticipated a relocation from the pantry's original spot in Stubbeman Place, but when the air conditioning went out last spring, the need for a new space became urgent. The university offered up the shuttered Cate Center Food Court, a casualty of pandemic closures, nearly tripling the available footage.

Without interrupting services, a handful of students completed the move to the more visible location, which opened in August.

Leading the pantry's record year is Nitin Rangu, a 21-year-old senior psychology major with a pre-medicine concentration from Longview, Texas.

The director of operations says he's thrilled that more students are finding and making use of the pantry this year. But record numbers also paint a picture of the campus community's increasing need for help.

"I just met someone who said they never had to use the pantry before, but their rent increased this summer and with gas prices going up, they needed it now," Rangu says as he checks people in using their campus IDs. All OU students, faculty and staff members can access the pantry's free offerings.

Oklahoma is the fifth hungriest state in the nation, according to Feeding America's 2022 *Map the Meal Gap* report. In Cleveland County, where OU's Norman campus is located, the report shows more than 32,000 people don't have enough to eat.



Whitney Bryen

OU landscaper and former associate pastor Todd Handley says the pantry helps stretch his salary to support himself and a dependent, disabled sibling.

Customers select from a menu and fill out requests online before volunteers fill bags of food supplied by Crest Foods, food banks and donors. One week in 2022, the pantry served more than 500 people.



Whitney Bryen



Phillip Lyons

A T-shirt highlights the OU Food Pantry's values.

On a brisk Tuesday morning, Amoah arrives for his weekly grocery pickup. Tomatoes and onions make a perfect puree for Jollof rice, which reminds him of home, and a tasty omelet for breakfast the next morning.

Amoah says the pantry saves him \$50 to \$100 per week, cutting his grocery bill in half.

The next week, he is back not as a client, but as a volunteer, cleaning shelves and filling online orders.

"I began volunteering about 10 months after I got here because I thought, 'This is where I get food items, and it has helped me so much, so why not give back to them?'" Amoah says.

The pantry is open Tuesday through Thursday, and regulars know that Tuesday mornings offer the best selection.

A Ph.D. student flips through donated children's books in a reading section, seeking something to entertain his 4-year-old. A university employee carries bags of groceries in one hand and his infant daughter in the other, while a student in his 40s who recently returned to finish his degree rushes out behind them to catch the bus. International students huddle around the coffee station chatting in Mandarin and Spanish and snacking on donated leftovers from Einstein Brothers Bagels.

International mathematics graduate student Tatiana Abdelnaim says the busy pantry lowers the stigma that comes with asking for help. Every week, she sees that she's not alone.

"A friend told me about the pantry, and now I tell people about it, too," Abdelnaim says. "It was hard to come that first time, but then you're here and you see everyone else who's just like you and that feeling goes away pretty quickly."

A partnership with the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma allows the pantry to place monthly orders at deep discounts. Donations from Feed the Children, private gifts from OU alumni and friends, and student organization food drives

help keep the shelves stocked year-round.

A "Thank you, Crest" banner hangs above the refrigerator where students pull the last carton of milk about an hour after opening for the week. Daily donations of fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy are provided by the Oklahoma grocery store chain Crest Foods, founded by OU President Joseph Harroz Jr.'s late uncle, Nick Harroz Jr.

Potatoes, chicken, beef patties, bananas and tomatoes are packed into sacks and left on a table, where they await clients who are scanning nearby shelves for canned and boxed foods or browsing several clothing racks lined up near a hodgepodge of donated household goods.

Todd Handley strains to carry two full sacks of food as he exits the pantry. The lean 70-year-old landscaper has worked for the university for nearly 13 years, but his salary isn't enough to sustain both him and a dependent, disabled sister.

"I can't even afford a haircut these days," Handley says. "Inflation, gas prices, it's making it really hard right now. And I'd like to be able to put some money in savings to retire someday but it's just not enough, so ..." he shrugs.

Handley is a former associate pastor who used to run a food pantry and cook meals for the homeless at his Oklahoma City church. Now, he is grateful for OU students and donors who help support him.

"They're doing great things for people," Handley says. "I knew it made a difference back then, too, you know, but now it's making a difference for me."

Marks was among a handful of students who started the pantry in 2017 after the idea was developed by the OU Student Government Association. Today, there are more than 50 students on the food pantry's team and hundreds of active volunteers, he says. It's the highest number they've ever had, but the increase in clients and larger space means they could use even more helping hands.

Marks says the student volunteers "just get it," and their passion for the cause keeps the OU Food Pantry alive and growing.

"I've worked with a lot of organizations over the years. You hope you're making an impact, but a lot of times you don't really know," Rangu says. "But everything you do here, every time you bag a can from the shelf or pull food out of the fridge, you know that someone is going to have dinner tonight. That's why I keep coming back. That's why we all do."

The OU Food Pantry relies entirely on donations. To make a gift, visit Home.oufoundation.org/pantry

Whitney Bryen is a multimedia journalist who writes for Oklahoma Watch.