



Fighting Hunger, Feeding Hope

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The day she lost everything.

Dianna Wood remembers it was a cold day in February, with subzero wind chills.

In fact, Dianna can remember almost every detail of that Saturday in 2007.



In the small town of Salem, Ill., news usually travels fast. But on this day, Dianna Wood worked her regular shift at the tire shop, completely unaware.

“The fire department came in with a flat tire and said, ‘can you hurry up? We gotta get back to the fire.’ I said, ‘Oh. Where’s the fire?’”

When the firefighter said the fire was on Summertime Road, Dianna still didn’t register that it could be her address.

She checked her phone. No one had called.

“I didn’t believe it,” Dianna says.

Maybe it was shock. Maybe it was denial. But Dianna didn’t even leave work. Finally, an hour before quitting time, she headed for home.

“It was a single lane road, and I didn’t see smoke until I got close,” she says.

“There was only one truck left. I was like no, this can’t be happening.”

The large home that had housed seven apartments, including Dianna’s, was destroyed by the fire. The cause of the blaze was never formally identified, but residents speculated that the landlord’s dog had knocked over a lamp.

“I lost everything but my truck and what I had on,” Dianna says. **“I couldn’t say anything. I just broke**

Washington County



Dianna Wood and scores of volunteers from Irvington and neighboring communities volunteer at a Food Fair. The St. Louis Area Foodbank hosted a Food Fair with the Irvington Food Pantry in late February 2012.

down in tears.”

Unfortunately, the landlord had let the home's insurance policy lapse. Dianna had no renter's insurance on her own belongings.

Fortunately, members of the community stepped in to help. Neighbors donated a microwave, furniture and dishes. A co-worker at Salem Tire offered to let her live in a trailer in nearby Alma, Ill.

“They helped me out,” she says. “If I hadn't been in a small town, these things wouldn't have happened. “It's hard for somebody like me to even ask for help.”

Dianna began putting the pieces of her life back together, but even now, struggles to remember what was lost.

“I try to remember, did I have that before the fire, or after the fire,” she says.

In the aftermath of the fire, Dianna lost her job at Salem Tire when her contract ran out. She had been placed at the tire shop through a temporary staffing agency.

“I was making pretty good money but they didn't want to pay benefits,” Dianna says.

Dianna, 55, briefly worked at Bryan Manor, a rehabilitation home in Salem, before she was forced to quit because the home moved to Centralia. She could not afford to drive her aging truck from the trailer in Alma to the new location.

Unemployed and concerned for her future, Dianna went to the unemployment office for help. Though she had decades of work experience in retail and restaurant management, the counselor suggested she get training in a new field.

Dianna enrolled in Kaskaskia College in 2009. She completed her office medical personnel certificate in 2010.

Dianna polished her resume over and over, highlighting her management positions at Sears tire centers in Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee. But still, she has had no luck finding a job.

She now lives in her first real home since the fire – income-based apartments in tiny Irvington, Ill. But the lack of employment and the loss of all her possessions has left her in financial distress.

Her truck is unfit to drive, and she no longer has car insurance. She has not been able to afford health insurance since her last full-time job in 2005. Her unemployment benefits ran out in 2010.

“When I was getting unemployment, I only went to the food pantry maybe once every other month, just to tide me over,” Dianna says.

But now, she has no choice but to rely on the Irvington Food Pantry to survive. Her only income is the \$225 a month she receives from the Irvington Township for general assistance. She also receives \$200 a month in food stamps.

The food stamps help buy meat, cereal and basic items like sugar and salt.



During the Food Fair, the Foodbank delivered almost 19,000 pounds of food to Irvington. Volunteers distributed the food to 160 families in just three hours.

“I rely on the food pantry for my vegetables and any extras they may have like toilet paper or shampoo,” she says. “It’s a godsend that they have toilet paper.”

Since she can’t drive and the nearest grocery store is miles away, Dianna often has to shop at the only place in town – a tiny convenience store where prices are high and fresh food is scarce.

Dianna is grateful that one of the local churches gives out vitamins through a grant program.

“You know you don’t eat properly if you don’t have enough of everything else,” she says. “There are times I may have cereal for dinner or oatmeal.”

Dianna believes in paying it forward, and giving back as much as she is able. If she receives food or products she can’t use, she shares them with her neighbors.

She has walked in fundraisers for muscular dystrophy and the Susan G. Komen Foundation, and she spends any free moments weaving prayer shawls at her church, Friedens United Church of Christ in Irvington. She also volunteers at the food pantry.

“I can offer help, even if I can’t afford to give,” she says. “I may not live high on the hog, but what I’ve got I’m happy to share. I hope that other people realize that it’s not charity but it’s being charitable, because we’re all human and we all need a little help.”

Dianna shared her story in March 2012 with Bethany Prange, communications coordinator at the St. Louis Area Foodbank. Her personal circumstances may have changed since the original interview.



Bethany Prange



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