

# Fulfilling needs right at home **Holdrege teen helps hungry kids with Backpack Blessings**



Alexandra Alber

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**HOLDREGE** — A Holdrege teen hopes to help hungry children in her own community with a new program called Backpack Blessings.

“Feeding our starving children can start right here at home, and that is what I am hoping to accomplish with this project,” Alexandra Alber said.

Alber, 17, a junior at Holdrege High School, participated in the Youth Engaged in Leading Phelps program’s first class this past year. As part of that program, she was challenged to come up with a service project to benefit her community.

The church that Alber attends, Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Holdrege, also houses the community’s Christian charity fund.

“Our pastor would tell stories of people in our community who come in and just need so much,” she said. “I thought it would be really helpful if they didn’t have to provide for so much on the weekends. Kids get their food during the week when they are at school, but then on the weekends they were on their own.”

Alber said she was surprised to learn that so many Holdrege children were in need. She researched the number of children on free and reduced lunches at Holdrege elementary schools and learned that 132 children qualified in 2010.

“If they can’t pay for their lunch at school, you never know what they’re getting at home,” Alber said.

She said the Holdrege community rallies to raise funds and volunteer for the Feed My Starving Children project, which packs and sends food to the poor foreign countries. So, she thought she would be able to get support for Backpack Blessings.

The concept is to pack and donate a bag of food for kids to take home in their backpacks over the weekend. She learned that similar programs have been successful in other communities.

The mission for Backpack Blessings is “to supply good meals to children and to make people aware of the needs in Holdrege.”

“We want to keep the community involved and continue to help in making Holdrege a better place to live for everyone,” Alber said.

Alber wanted to connect with a community organization to help get Backpack Blessings off the ground and become sustainable.

In the meantime, Candance Miller, the director of Children and Youth Ministries at First United Methodist Church, hoped to start a similar project. She had reached a standstill when she learned that Alber was interested in the same type of project.

"We decided we could get together and make this happen," Miller said.

Alber, who participated in the Educational Service Unit's Summer Honors program in Entrepreneurship last summer, also researched this project through that program. She visited with people in Polk, where a similar program has been successful and learned about the logistics of the program.

Through Miller's research, she determined that the food pack price could be whittled down to about \$5 per pack.

"We are trying to hit all our resources to see what our best option is to get it down to that price," Miller said.

Some local business owners told Alber that they would contribute to the project if needed.

"It was really nice to know that they are super-supportive of us," Alber said.

To help fund the program, Miller said, they may seek donations of \$180, which would fund one child's weekend food packs for an entire school year.

They hope to enlist the help of local churches to help with the packing and to have each church be responsible for one month of finding volunteers to pack the bags.

The food would be packed into a Ziplock bag that can be discreetly tucked into a child's backpack. All the food would be nonperishable. Examples might be cereal packs or cereal bars, a cup of fruit, canned spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, juice and shelf-stable milk.

"We are trying to make it a supplement to a diet, not replace a whole diet," Alber said.

They hope to launch Backpack Blessings when school starts in the fall.

"I think it will come together pretty quickly once we get some of the little things ironed out," Alber said.

Alber, the daughter of Dennis and Sheri Alber, also is involved in dance classes, the HHS dance team, volleyball, track, National Honor Society and youth group, and she serves on the 4-H Council and as president of her 4-H club. She works as a dance instructor at The Dance Academy in Holdrege.