

CLOSER LOOK

Fairfield is a stop on the Beast of Burden Challenge

Marathon runner on tour stops at Shared Harvest.

By Michael D. Pitman
Staff Writer

FAIRFIELD — Marathon runner Jess Kurti has traveled across the country completing dozens of races, and along the way she's volunteered for a few hours at 130 foodbanks.

In what's being called a Beast of Burden Challenge, Shared Harvest Foodbank in Fairfield on Thursday was the 44-year-old's 131st stop on her way to volunteer at all 200 foodbanks within the Feeding America network as she raises awareness on the issue of hunger and food insecurity.

"Hunger really is kind of a symptom and it really tells us how well we're doing as a country in all sorts of areas," Kurti said. "It's an uncomfortable thing for people to hear, but that is the solid truth. Everything is reflected with food insecurity and poverty."

Shared Harvest Foodbank Executive Director Tina Osso said it was "an honor" to have someone as committed as Kurti to this cause; she's giving up three years of her life "to give back to people who don't feel empowered and included."

"I think she brings a whole new level of information, power and engagement here



Jess Kurti volunteers Thursday at the Shared Harvest Foodbank on Dixie Highway in Fairfield. She's running in marathons across the country. MICHAEL D. PITMAN / STAFF

and across the country," Osso said.

Kurti had been a volunteer at the Second Harvest Foodbank of Central Florida, becoming heavily involved with the organization. She asked the director if anyone had volunteered at all 200. The answer was "no," so Kurti said, "I'm going to do that."

Kurti was able to do this after she was "downsized out of a job" in 2012. In 2013, she started out as a 50-state marathoner (running a marathon in each state), but it's since transformed into what she's calling the Beast of Burden Challenge.

"While I was road-tripping, I decided to volunteer to give back to the communities I was lucky enough

to visit," said Kurti, who's eclipsed the 50-marathon goal. But the Beast of Burden Challenge is part of a push to change her life, to have a "purpose-driven life" and lead a life of service.

She hopes to wrap up her challenge by next spring — and compete in 100 marathons.

Nearly 15 percent of Americans were considered to be in poverty in 2014, which equates to roughly 46.7 million people. But more than 48 million Americans — which includes 15.3 million children — lived in a home that was considered food insecure. That equates to 17.4 million households.

In Ohio, one in five kids lives in a home that faces hunger routinely. Shared

Harvest serves 3,000 families a month, and a decade earlier — before the recession — that number was around 1,400.

"While many jobs have been created in Ohio and many people turn to our network for groceries or hot meals, they're not making a living wage," Osso said. "They're not bringing home enough money to pay the bills and buy food."

Kurti's time at Shared Harvest in Fairfield is something anyone can do in the "monumental effort to end hunger," and she believes if more people have the national and their local statistics in their consciousness, "I really do believe we can end hunger in our lifetime."

But Kurti said if those numbers can come down, "then we know we're succeeding in other areas."

"It's going to take a lot of will, it's going to take a lot of action by a lot of different hands, and fortunately there are thousands and thousands of people working on it, at the political level down to the grassroots and boots on the ground."

Kurti said while there is a challenge to get food to people who need, it's easy for someone to make an impact — "and that effect of your help is immediate."

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