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Fighting hunger

By Joyce Kelly/Staff Writer
Wednesday, February 14, 2007 - Updated: 02:25 PM EST

Sixteen-year-old Daniel Levine already had many foster siblings, but neither their plight, nor that of their parents, ever really phased him.

“When we first started taking in kids, I didn’t really understand the situation. I’d hear their stories, but it never dawned on me why they needed (intervention),” he said.

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Then he discovered his 2-year-old foster sister’s mother was only two months older than he was and started imagining what it would be like to be in her position.

He began wondering why the foster sister whom he adored, like many other of the 28 foster children his family have taken in, were arriving at his home severely underweight.

“She was the one who really made things click and inspired me to do research and find out why there are kids going to bed hungry every



Dan Levine, 17, and his father, Steve, founded Mass Children’s Fund to aid needy families with babies. (Lisa Cassidy)

night,” said Daniel Levine, now 17.

He learned from the Boston Food Bank that more than 100,000 families request food assistance annually, and that government food assistance programs do not provide baby food, only formula and food stamps that parents may or may not spare on baby food.

Daniel Levine became determined to find a way to get baby food to families who cannot afford it.

Together, the Levines started the Mass Children’s Fund, a statewide organization dedicated to supplying families with baby food.

They successfully solicited help collecting baby food from churches, business owners, corporations, places of worship, social organizations, and schools across Worcester County and the MetroWest.

Students at Proctor Elementary School in Northborough collected 1,200 jars of baby food, Westborough High School students are donating money to purchase food, and Algonquin Regional High School students have contributed as well.

Currently in Holliston, Placentino Elementary students are running a food drive for Mass Children’s Fund, and students at Shrewsbury High School and the Wachusett district will organize drives as well, Steven Levine said.

“We’re lucky so many people have been so generous,” he said.

Every week, boxes of baby food crowd the Levines’ garage, until a Rachel’s Table delivery truck comes to pick up and distribute the 2,000- 2,500 of collected jars of baby food they average every week.

In eight short months, they’ve collected and distributed about 50,000 meals, according to Steven Levine.

The outpouring of food and monetary donations to purchase baby food wholesale enables Mass Children’s Fund to give parents anything they request – they have not had to deny anyone, Daniel Levine said.

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Parents simply log on to their Web site, put in a request, and leave an address. Volunteers then deliver the food directly to their homes.

“It’s something I’m very proud of. When I go drop off food and talk to parents, it’s just the most amazing feeling,” Steven Levine said.

Their board of directors has grown from two to 20, boding from Marlborough, Boston, Chelmsford, Westborough, and Northborough, and beyond.

The baby food collected by Mass Children’s Fund gets distributed to dozens of shelters in Massachusetts, including a number in Framingham and Worcester.

People have started sending the organization unsolicited gifts of baby strollers, car seats, bassinets, and carriages that teams of volunteers clean, assemble, and bring them to families in need.

“We’ve come a long way: from handing out one case of baby food at a time, to now sending out truckloads. But it’s always going to be an issue – the game’s not over,” said Daniel Levine.

One in three children living in Worcester are hungry or are at-risk of being hungry each month, according to Rachel’s Table, a free distribution service dedicated to delivering food to the hungry.

“People don’t realize, whether you live in Worcester or Wellesley, within a mile of your house, there’s a family going hungry.

“A lot of these people are hardworking people who just need help. It’s not just people being irresponsible; just sometimes the circumstances in which you’ve been place make it difficult,” said Daniel Levine.

Many young mothers are in high school just like him, he said.

He doesn’t have a job, but he is busy from the moment schools lets out until 9 at night, doing homework and extracurricular activities, he said.

“I couldn’t imagine having a baby and having to feed it while doing everything that I’m doing between school and all my activities – I imagine it’d be incredibly difficult,” said Daniel Levine.

Breaking the Cycle

In addition to the baby food, many parents need education about proper nutrition for infants, Steven Levine said.

“We see parents giving kids Kool-Aid or lemonade in a bottle, and they think that’s a fruit because it’s grape flavored! There’s no reason in the world a baby should have anything inside its bottle other than formula,” he said.

Parents typically mix unwholesome foods like French fries, hot dogs, rice and beans with formula to create a paste, and feed it to their infants instead of real, nutritious baby food, he said.

Often, that pattern is something parents learned from their parents, and so on, and it is a cycle the Levines hope to break through education.

They have already arranged for nutritionists to speak at shelters through the Mass Children’s Fund.

“Poor nutrition leads to a lot of medical issues – and these families usually don’t have insurance,” Steven Levine said.

The organization’s primary focus is on helping parents get through the critical eight-month period, when children are four months to a year old, he said.

Another goal is to distribute 10,000 meals to infants on a weekly basis.

The Levines dream of opening a store where everything is free: baby food, formula, baby strollers, carriages, and other necessities.

“It will be no questions asked,” said Daniel Levine. In their minds, the ways to help are endless.

“If we’re not talking about it, we’re constantly thinking about it, and what we can do next.

“Ideas come at random times – in the middle of class, an idea will just pop into my head and I’ll write it down,” said Daniel Levine.

Through WICN radio, the Levines have six front row tickets to the April 3 David Crosby-Graham Nash concert at Mechanics Hall in Worcester (their only stop in Massachusetts) – they are ready to pass them on to corporate sponsors.

Individuals who would like to buy tickets to benefit Mass Children's Fund may still do so for \$50.

All proceeds go directly to purchasing baby food.

Help in many forms

They are appealing to the public and corporations to donate food, money, and space for storage, and ultimately, their free store.

The Levines hope Girl Scouts and Boy Scout troops, Parent Teacher Organizations, and more businesses and corporations will offer support as well.

"It doesn't take a huge amount of effort. Every individual can do something, whether it's donating \$20 or helping to run a baby food drive in their town," said Steven Levine.

For instance, a Shrewsbury dentist recently put a sign out in front of his practice, and within a week, had taken in 1,000 jars of baby food, he said.

Daniel's mother, Jamie, a pediatric nurse had a unique contribution: making the family understand what the hunger crisis.

She decided it wasn't enough to simply give money; she wanted to personally care for children in need, Steven Levine said.

"Mom likes to get her hands dirty. She's an activist. She's always the spark," said Daniel Levine.

It never occurred to the Levine family that such widespread hunger was a problem too daunting to tackle; they simply started taking "baby steps" toward stopping it, they said.

"Anything can be done if you try," said Daniel's father, Steven Levine.

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