

O'Briens follow Christian mandate in volunteer work

By Christine Bordelon
Clarion Herald

Mary Ann and Jerry O'Brien are like the Energizer bunny. They keep on giving and giving of their time even after retiring from careers with the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

These days, the 51-year married couple volunteers one day a week at Second Harvest Food Bank in Elmwood.

"I've always wanted to do this," Mary Ann O'Brien, 72, said.

Their job is always varied at Second Harvest. They could

be making boxes, sorting food items, sweeping, mopping, unloading food trucks or filing papers in the office.

"They're good people," Debora Fleming, repack supervisor, said of the O'Briens. "They are willing to do what I ask them to do and do everything possible. They are just like one of us."

On a recent day, the O'Briens worked alongside Bernadette Jones, an Our Lady of Guadalupe parishioner with AmeriCorps, and others from Xavier University and First Baptist Church. The chatter among the volunteers was jovial and uplifting,

each realizing their task was meaningful, no matter how small.

"I gives me great pleasure knowing that the food is going to somebody who really needs it and will benefit from it," Jones said about her morning at Second Harvest.

Fleming said the close to 200 volunteers weekly are essential to the operation of Second Harvest.

"If it wasn't for the volunteers, we wouldn't get anything done," she said.

Second Harvest was a natural choice for the O'Briens after they retired because of its link to Catholic Charities and their strong connection to the local Catholic church.

"When you are getting ready to retire, you think of all the things you want to do," said Mary Ann O'Brien, who retired in April 2007 after 22 years with the archdiocese. "I thought of 'feed the hungry.' It's one of the things that we as Christians are supposed to do: 'feed the hungry; clothe the naked.'"

O'Brien had been secretary to Archbishops Alfred Hughes and Francis Schulte and then-Msgr. Robert Muench (now bishop of Baton Rouge), who was Archbishop Hannan's assistant.

"It was the best working environment I had ever been in," she said of the archdiocesan work. "The people who work for the church have a different attitude. Everybody



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Mary Ann O'Brien, above right, and husband Jerry O'Brien, below right, retired archdiocesan employees, volunteer one day a week at Second Harvest Food Bank. Both have found it gratifying to help people through their work with Second Harvest. "I was surprised about the needy in New Orleans," said Jerry. In choosing the charity at which to work, Mary Ann said, "I thought of 'feed the hungry.' It's one of the things we as Christians are supposed to do."



was kind and charitable. It was a second family for me."

She said each priest she served enhanced her faith. From Bishop Muench she witnessed tireless energy, enthusiasm and humor. From Archbishop Schulte she witnessed strong administrative skills and the ability to delegate. From Archbishop Hughes she saw an example of Christian love. He is "other-centered." His book, "Spiritual Masters," helped her gain spiritual insight.

Jerry O'Brien, 74, also found faith affirmation as building engineer at Loyola

University, then Notre Dame Seminary and finally the archdiocesan administrative building on Howard and Loyola avenues. Before that, he had worked for 25 years with American Standard.

"I thought it was great working with a group of Christian people," he said. "You could count on them to stand behind you, and if you needed help, they'd be there for you. I couldn't have asked for better people to work with."

It was Mary Ann O'Brien who prompted the idea to get involved with Second Harvest. But both spouses have found it gratifying to help people.

"I was really surprised about the needy in New Orleans," he said.

Their volunteer plans aren't going to stop at Second Harvest either. Mary Ann O'Brien is considering rocking babies at Children's Hospital, while her husband has his eyes set on the Jefferson Humane Society to work with animals.

"I just haven't gotten to that yet," Mary Ann O'Brien said. "We can't do it all, but I feel like we can do a little bit."

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