

BY KATTI GRAY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRI GLANGER

ACTION JACKSON

In a season when so many are in need, Cheryl Jackson's mission is to feed the hungry and offer a balm to their wounded spirits. Once hungry herself, she now gives others—including some very high-profile celebrities—a way to share their blessings and spread the love

Cheryl Jackson remembers the span of years when her two little boys didn't eat unless their father brought home leftovers from the pizza shop where he worked, or their mom finessed a meal from someone else's kitchen. "We would go to people's houses when we knew their dinner would be ready so that we could feed our children," she admits. "We were struggling to survive without telling anyone our situation. I used to dream about how it was going to feel to one day feed my kids well."

There's a catch in her voice as she relives the sense of failure she felt as a young wife and mother during those early years of marriage. Jackson was just 17 when her father, a preacher and a plumber, signed on the dotted line so that his underage daughter could marry Artis Jackson, a church boy she'd grown up with. The couple was deeply, unequivocally in love, says Jackson, but it soon became clear that love—and a patchwork of low-wage jobs—would not sustain their household. "I felt such despair during those times," the now 45-year-old Texas native says. Yet even in her darkest hours, she somehow knew she would one day stand on the other side of the table, serving people in need: "As we were coming through the hardest part of it, I asked God to never let me lose that feeling of despair so that when it was my turn to serve, no one would ever, ever have to feel the way I'd felt. When someone in dire straits stands before me today, I see the mother I was, I see my sons' father. I look straight in people's faces and put myself in their shoes."

That empathy is the core principle of Minnie's Food Pantry, a massive operation in Plano, Texas, fueled by Jackson's years of living in poverty and by her determination to honor her parents, both Pentecostal pastors who exemplified for their daughter a deep sense of clarity. These days, Cheryl "Action" Jackson, as Minnie's relentless founder is known, embodies a made-for-headlines celebrity based on the success of the food pantry she named for her mother. Established five years ago, Jackson's project has been showcased on the Food Network, on Trinity Broadcasting Network and by several major news organizations and other media outlets. A roster of corporations and firms, gospel music stars and professional athletes, Hollywood honchos and local heroes

have also backed Minnie's with their cash, their volunteer time and their muscle.

"When I was a child, my grandmother took us to a place called Neighbor to Neighbor because we were hungry," says the Detroit Tigers' Torii Hunter, recalling his own hard-scrabble upbringing in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. "To see the way Cheryl runs things at Minnie's and all the people who come through there, right away her work hit home for me. I thought, *This is what I need to be a part of.*"

Gospel artist Fred Hammond, also a stalwart supporter of Minnie's, remembers how it felt to pay for groceries with food stamps when he was a boy growing up in Detroit. "When you help the hungry, you help God," says Hammond, who now lives in Dallas. "We've got to do more than simply say to people, 'Be warmed and be filled' when they're in trouble. Cheryl is giving her time and substance to people during their roughest time. And she's doing it with so much honesty and transparency."

Minnie's is, more than anything, a family undertaking: Jackson's son, Robert, now 26, helps run the food pantry; her other son, Artis, Jr., now 24, is a volunteer and Jackson's daughter-in-law Zoya, 23, is her executive assistant and one of four full-time staffers. "This has been a journey of faith, perseverance and hope for us all," says Jackson. "I know now that God had our family go hungry to prepare us for this work."

Our Daily Bread

For the first six years of marriage, Cheryl and Artis Jackson delivered newspapers and pizzas. She was also a cashier and bagged groceries at a Winn-Dixie supermarket, while he occasionally found landscaping jobs. But as hard as they worked, their pay didn't always cover the necessities. "I used to beg my wife not to tell her father how much we were struggling," says Artis, Sr., 48. "It was an embarrassment to me that I could not take care of her." When the couple wed, Robert Hawthorne had told his new son-in-law, "I'm giving you my daughter, but don't dare put your hands on her. And if you can't take care of her, bring her back." Artis couldn't bear the thought of letting him down. By the time Cheryl's father passed away in 2004, the couple had just started to see the first signs of prosperity. >

VISIT ESSENCE.COM

NOVEMBER 2013 | ESSENCE 139



Cheryl "Action" Jackson, founder of Minnie's Food Pantry, helps others overcome the shame of poverty she once faced herself by offering patrons the red-carpet treatment.

They were at their lowest point in the mid-1990's, when the boys were 8 and 6 years old, but then Cheryl and Artis slowly began to cobble together a living that put their family on more stable ground. Eventually, Artis started his own corporate landscaping and maintenance company, and it did well. Meanwhile, Cheryl graduated from working in the Winn-Dixie checkout line to a \$60,000-a-year gig as regional manager for a pager company. That eventually led to her writing a business plan for former Dallas Cowboys running back Emmitt Smith to launch his own pager company. From there, Jackson sold cars to, among others, Smith's Cowboys teammates. Then—because of her gift of gab, her mother says—she was promoted to customer relations director for that car dealership.

Through it all Jackson never forgot the promise she'd made to herself in the lean years, to serve others who were trying to climb out of poverty. In 2008, with items extracted from her own kitchen in Plano, she opened the first incarnation of Minnie's in a 600-square-foot storefront. Minnie's first customers were neighborhood families recruited by Jackson's older son. Jackson recalls watching one elementary school-age child trek to a local supermarket to fetch

rolls out a rock star-worthy red carpet for those who need its services.

"Our volunteers sort, label, organize the pantry and serve as concierges for the day," Jackson explains. "They come to greet, to hug, to show love; they dance. They come to encourage and say, 'You're gonna be okay.' We serve food, yes, but also hope, which is more crucial, really. And we will—just for that day—fire any volunteer with a bad attitude. You cannot serve the people with a bad attitude." And when Jackson's 67-year-old mother, the Reverend Minnie Ewing, is in the house, she is likely to send up an old-fashioned Pentecostal prayer and, for those who permit it, lay her hands on them in an act of spiritual intimacy.

All the while, music streams pleasantly from the speakers as clients fill shopping carts from shelves brimming with rice, beans, pastas, canned vegetables,

marinades and other staples, and from ten commercial fridges and freezers of meat, produce and other perishable items.

Lorena Bianco, 46, began relying on Minnie's three years ago, after she left a job as a school cafeteria worker to care for her mother, who has Alzheimer's, and her father, who died of heart disease last November. Bianco appreciates the food the pantry puts on her family's table and the bicycle that Minnie's gave to her daughter one Christmas. But what stirs her deepest gratitude is the respect Minnie's crew bestows upon those who need their help. "Last Thanksgiving Day I felt so bad," Bianco says. "I went to Minnie's and they were like angels for me. They know my name. They remember my name. They give me a hug. They ask for nothing in return."

Jackson's two sons were her first volunteers at Minnie's Food Pantry, which will mark its fifth year of continuous operation.



Passion Meets Purpose

Cheryl Jackson will tell you that an empty belly is only one of the hurts felt by a person who doesn't have enough food. She knows

whatever her family's few dollars would buy each evening. "This little girl would walk by every day," Jackson says. "And I'm thinking, *Give us this day our daily bread.* That child's family was one of the first that Minnie's fed."

Minnie's has since served tens of thousands of hungry customers, averaging 1,200 families each month. Supported by 5,000 volunteers of every race, religion, occupation and philosophical bent, the food pantry will move into its new 10,000-square-foot warehouse in Plano this month. Upper-class comforts prevail in that community of 270,000 inhabitants north of Dallas, but people who are struggling are also starkly evident. And so Minnie's Food Pantry literally

firsthand the other degradations that can accompany those hunger pangs. During her family's period of distress, she encountered caseworkers at the food stamp office who were downright scornful, dismissing the young couple as shiftless, even though Cheryl and Artis often held down two or three jobs apiece. "I still smell that office," Jackson says now. "I still see the people waiting. I still hear the kids crying. The whole experience was so demeaning. Although I got declined for welfare assistance, they gave me a brown paper bag and said maybe it would provide a meal for my sons. Inside were items like a can of beets past its expiration date that I couldn't safely serve to anybody. I thought, *God, there has to be a better way.*"

Today at Minnie's, if nowhere else, a hungry person can feel special—rather than ashamed—when he or she walks through the doors. “We don’t have any judgment,” says pantry volunteer Aenise Montgomery, 46, a banking analyst who moved to the Dallas area after Hurricane Katrina laid waste to her neighborhood in New Orleans. “Sometimes we see folks coming in with the nice jeans, the nice shoes,” she adds, “and we give them an extra hug because who knows what it feels like for them to be coming in here?”

Indeed, economists say the current recession has unraveled the affairs of many families who once had considerable financial means, with requests for emergency food assistance spiking by an average of 22 percent last year. “One day recently a Hummer pulled up,” Jackson recalls. “I’m thinking this is a possible donor; I’m going to give them a tour. Then they said to me, ‘This car could be our home. We’re barely holding on.’” The main breadwinner of that family had been downsized months before, and their savings had evaporated.

Minnie’s is there for all comers, with its founder seizing every opportunity to expand the operation’s reach. One year she showed up at gospel music’s annual Stellar Awards without a ticket and wrangled an introduction to singer and pastor Donnie McClurkin, whom she invited to visit Minnie’s. McClurkin, footballer Emmitt Smith and his wife, Pat Smith, and Brad Bessey, who is the executive producer of the entertainment news program *OMG! Insider*, will all be saluted during Minnie’s November 11 fundraising gala in Frisco, Texas. Baseball player Torii Hunter and his wife, Katrina Hunter, are, in fact, the event’s honorary cochairs. They live in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area during the off-season and regularly stop by Minnie’s to help stock the pantry—sometimes even handing out cash to those standing in line. “It’s a celebration of the people who have helped echo my voice, who are on a wider platform than I am,” says Jackson, noting that she met Bessey when she appeared on *The Talk*, which actress Holly Robinson Peete cohosted at the time.



Jackson (center) runs the pantry with the help of (from left) son Artis, Jr., daughter-in-law Zoja, mother Minnie, husband Artis, Sr., and son Robert.

It stands to reason that Jackson’s passionate sense of purpose would attract other do-gooders, says her mother. “My daughter never had a problem asking anyone for anything,” says Ewing, chuckling. Adds husband Artis: “People really want to help. They want to do good with what they’ve got. And everybody out there isn’t broke. They want to help because of the joy Cheryl brings and the camaraderie.”

Minnie’s supporters believe the food pantry is a God-ordained mission, a story of miracles: When a freak Texas winter storm piled so much snow atop the pantry that the roof caved in, a local television reporter’s coverage yielded ample funds for repairs, plus a raft of new volunteers. Another year Jackson and her baby sister competed on the game show *The American Bible Challenge* and won \$25,000. Then there was the day Jackson was trying to figure out how to pay \$2,135 in late rent. “I was home, crying like crazy and hollering. ‘Look here, Lord, I promised to go where you sent me, to do this ministry because I thought you told me to do it,’” Jackson recalls. “Then my assistant called and said, ‘You’ve got to come to the office.’ I walked in and there were these two kids with a check for \$2,185—money they had raised for the pantry selling candy and collecting 25-cent donations from other children.” That was rent money and \$50 to spare, Jackson says. “I hugged those children and fell on my knees. That was my sign. All I can do now is keep going until God tells me not to go anymore.” □

Writer Katti Gray lives in New York.

HELP FEED THE HUNGRY

A fund-raising gala commemorating the fifth anniversary of Minnie’s Food Pantry will be held November 11 at the Westin Stonebriar in Frisco, Texas. The pantry’s greatest needs are for cash donations to cover operating costs and contributed services in areas such as photography, Web site and graphic design and printing. For more information on how you could help, go to minniesfoodpantry.org. For more on Cheryl Jackson’s ministry of “taking action,” visit cheryljackson.com.