

Food from the Heart

Ann Tillotson began a quest to raise money and replace peanut butter sandwiches with the nutrition kid truly deserve



BY AMANDA KNOWLES
PHOTOS BY SILAS CREWS

There are a lot of things about grade school that are hard to forget, but school lunches might reign supreme. The aroma of hot dishes, delicious desserts and the occasional food fight linger in our memories. But what many don't remember—probably

because we never knew—are the kids in the lunchroom whose families couldn't afford hot lunches, and instead munched on peanut butter sandwiches day after day. Unable to stand the thought of these children settling for cold and unfulfilling morsels of food, Bloomington resident Ann Tillotson knew she had to help prevent any more children at school from going without a proper meal.

Tillotson is no stranger to volunteering; she

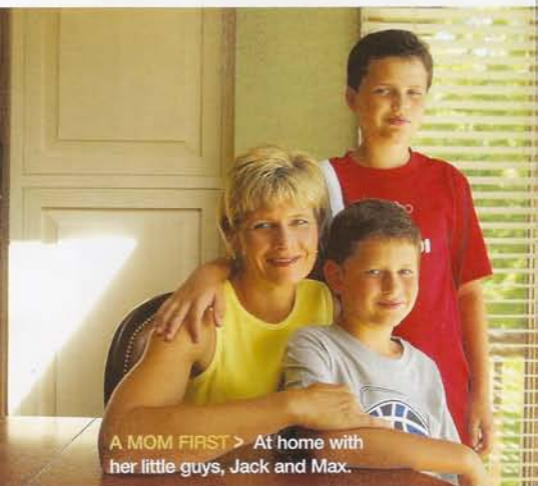
previously took part in Junior Achievement and helped head the United Way campaign at Piper Jaffray where she worked as an investment banker for more than 13 years. After her sons, Max, 8, and Jack, 10, were born, Tillotson decided to stay home fulltime to take care of "her guys," which includes husband, Chris, a radiologist. She became involved with her sons' activities and schooling at Normandale Hills Elementary School in Bloomington. When she caught wind of the school lunch situation, she answered the calling to begin working for a cause.

"There were kids whose families weren't current on lunch payments, and it wasn't only unhealthy, but they [also] got labeled by other kids after going through the line and listening to an insufficient funds buzzer going off," Tillotson says. "I just felt it was really demeaning and embarrassing for these kids who already go through a lot at school."

Tillotson brought her concerns to Normandale Hills' principal, Tom Lee, in 2004, and with his encouragement and assistance, Tillotson started writing letters to friends for contributions and sending out fliers to every family with an elementary school child in Bloomington. The next step was getting a sponsor and nonprofit status to help raise more funds. The Education Foundation Board of Bloomington not only gave the cause a go-ahead and became the primary sponsor of the new organization, called Children's Food for Thought, but also asked Tillotson to join the board.

"From the beginning we wanted to be a nonprofit, charitable organization with a mission to help every elementary child in Bloomington have access to a school lunch," Tillotson says. The money raised thus far is handed over to committees at each school in charge of discovering which children need help. Tillotson says the group wants to make sure they reach every child in need. It also pays special attention to families that are just above the line of qualifying for free reduced lunches but are still in financial need. The money is deposited into their accounts at Paypams.com, a Web site set up to electronically pay school lunch bills on an anonymous basis so no one knows they are being provided for.

Within the first year of the project, they put



A MOM FIRST > At home with her little guys, Jack and Max.

\$800 into school lunches; 70 percent of the money coming from corporate companies, churches and unions, such as Wells Fargo, Richfield/Bloomington Credit Union, St. Michael's Lutheran Church and Bloomington Noon Rotary, while the other 30 percent has been contributed by generous individuals.

Tillotson says she's thrilled with what they were able to raise and provide during the first year and would ultimately like to transition the program into middle schools, where the need for support might be more apparent. She'd also like to see the program spread to other communities in the area.

"I was always involved with my kids' schooling and activities, but I always felt like that was a payback," Tillotson says with a smile. "But as a family, we wanted to do something to help others, and it's become a passion of ours to make sure no one is going hungry." **B**

Amanda Knowles is an editorial assistant for *Bloomington Magazine*.

How You Can Help

While the first year has been a success, Tillotson says Children's Food for Thought is still in need of aid in order to raise enough money to broaden horizons and keep the cause going. There are many avenues Bloomington residents can take to help make contributions:

- www.educationfoundationofbloomington.org
- www.paypams.com
- Contact Ann Tillotson at 952.996.0686
- Go to your own school district directly