

Mizell, Bessie: We are all in this Together ^[1]

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Bessie Mizell: We are all in this Together

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/11/2002. Copyrighted.
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I almost gave up on Bessie Mizell. Every time I passed through the remote swamplands of Tyrrell County, nearly a four-hour drive east of Raleigh, I tried to coax her into telling the story of the Church Road Emergency Food Closet. For years she graciously, but firmly, put me off. "This is not for my glory," she instructed me. "This is about doing what had to be done."

Just shy of her 80th birthday, Mrs. Mizell finally let me turn on my tape recorder. The retired school cafeteria director started the food closet, also called a food pantry, to help the hungry and malnourished during the terrible economic recession of the early 1980s. Her county's unemployment rate rose as high as 35 percent then. One quarter of the state's farmers went out of business in just a few years.

Mrs. Mizell told me that food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters now "are just a part of life." But it wasn't always that way. "It was something that 20 years ago was unheard of," she reminded me. Today more than 2,000 food pantries and other charities offer emergency food relief to several hundred thousand of the state's residents every year. Most are run by senior citizen volunteers like Bessie Mizell.



Bessie Mizelle. Photo by Chris Seward, 2002. To request permission to ~~use the photo~~ or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

When I was working in the lunchroom over at the elementary school, it seemed like the children came to school hungry. Sometimes the ladies that worked in the cafeteria gave them money to buy their lunch. We would also cook too many rolls. When I retired I wanted to do something to help. I called Pat Robertson -- you know, he's a minister that you look at on TV -- and I called everybody that I could think about to get some information about food pantries. "Contact your church," they said. My husband was a Mason, and I asked him, reckon I could get into the old Masonic Hall for a food pantry? At first the old hall was great. There was no heat, no air, no lights, no nothing. But I got some of my own cord and ran the lights from the hall. We didn't have much money to buy food. I got some small donations, and I started buying it. Callie Mae had a truck -- Callie Mae McCleese -- she's dead now -- and my husband had a truck, and we would haul it in and then we would bag it up. Other times they would call me and say, I'd like to pick up some food, and I'd say, OK, meet me at 12 o'clock and like that. It was very private. A lot of them liked it like that; it was just me and them. Sometimes I would go out and get people. It was just me and them. The people from Elizabeth City inspected us and they began to see cracks where the mice could come in. You can't put more food in here, they said. The lady over at the Family Resource Center found this building over on 94, and she said yep, I know just about all of them that come in. Some say, my job has closed down or we're off until summer. We have a lot of single parents, a lot of the elderly, a lot of the sick. I know somebody who is on dialysis three times a week and they can't come. All of the homeless need us. They ask for food that they don't have to cook because they don't have a stove or refrigerator. Sometimes I open the freezer and just let them pick what they want. I'll show them chops and hamburgers and hot dogs. Some come from families that are pretty well to-do, but they got off the right track. Sometimes I'm surprised by who comes in, but when you think about it, they're like anybody else and they have just as much right to this food as anybody. Then there are people that work every day but still need help, the ones that work in the logwoods or farms or home health, things like that. They might not fit into this or that particular guideline, but they come in and say, my child got sick and I need food. Some, their food stamps have been cut off. Sometimes they start saying, "I don't get but so much in my check," and I say, "You don't have to bring that up." I don't let them come in with all of that. I say, we are just trying to make a difference in your life. It's not like everybody thinks. Creditors now will have you evicted. And it's not like everybody can find a job that wants one. I tell them, you take your money and you pay your electric bills. It's about stretching that dollar, because food is really important. The Scriptures say the poor are going to be with you always. That means that somebody has the responsibility to help. But I've always been reluctant to think that this is a great thing that I am doing. It was like something that just had to be done.

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