**[Norfolk Daily News]**

HEADLINE: Global food shortage leaves local nonprofit high and dry

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A humble one-story, one-room building — the current Mercy Meals base of operations — exhibits an unassuming exterior. And yet, within its four walls are housed the means and motives to provide for millions in need across the world.

A local nonprofit dedicated to administering food to children and families in impoverished and in-crisis nations across the globe, the group that became Mercy Meals was founded in 2007 by Edie Noffke, a full-time nurse in Norfolk.

Since then, the foundation has sent out more than 8 million meals, each one enough to feed a family of up to six people. That work continues even amidst a slew of unforeseen complications over the past few years, from a pandemic to, more recently, a worldwide grain and soy shortage due to the war in Ukraine.

Back in 2008, Noffke was juggling her own set of challenges. When the strain of trying to handle all of the logistics of running a nonprofit alongside on-call shifts at the hospital through the night became unmanageable, Noffke turned to others for help. She expanded the operation to work in tandem with Orphan Grain Train, another locally based nonprofit that distributes humanitarian aid around the world.

Ross Petersen, a local businessman and Orphan Grain Train associate, was initially a donor to Mercy Meals and now helps to procure the needed food supplies at lower costs.

“It was tough on (Noffke). She was a nurse at the hospital. She worked nights and days. She had a schedule that was kind of crazy,” Petersen said. “We started looking into it and instead of giving a $5,000 or $10,000 donation, we decided we would turn around and try to help her out.”

For Orphan Grain Train’s part, co-founder Clayton Andrews agreed to provide Mercy Meals with housing, so long as it could pay for utilities, said Rhonda Wrenholt, Mercy Meals’ current executive director.

“They said that they’d always have a building for us, so it’s been very nice to have that work out and be a blessing for us,” Wrenholt said.

This allowed Mercy Meals, and Noffke, to assume a middle-man role, fielding volunteer group labor sessions and donations from across the Norfolk community to package meals for worldwide distribution by Orphan Grain Train. That has included sending aid to places abroad like Haiti, Romania and more recently, Ukraine, while also shipping domestically during natural disasters such as those in Louisiana, Texas and even closer to home in Pilger.

In recent years, however, this distribution network has faced various disruptions. After closing its doors for half a year before the release of the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021, Mercy Meals again has found itself sitting on its hands amid a mass grain shortage in Europe following the outset of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

According to [Reuters](https://b975.com/2022/05/03/ukraine-faces-grain-harvest-storage-crunch-as-exports-struggle/), Ukraine — a major global grain exporter — saw its April grain exports fall by roughly 73% compared to the same time last year.

And Petersen said the resulting vacuum in supply has created a ripple effect, affecting exports of grain and soybeans to the United States from Argentina, another major grain exporter.

“Everything that’s coming out of Argentina right now is causing the market to get a little inflated here in the United States because it’s all going to Europe, because the richest soil (in Europe) is actually in Ukraine, which is causing problems.” Petersen said.

Indeed, the global shortage is something the [Buenos Aires Times](https://batimes.com.ar/news/economy/global-grain-shortage-an-opportunity-for-argentinas-green-gold.phtml) described as a major opportunity for the country. On one hand, Argentina is seeing record yields in its wheat and sunflower production. On the other, while the country imports 60% of its fertilizer and gets 15% of its supply from Russia, a line that has now been cut off, soybeans require minimal fertilizer, allowing the country to more easily fulfill an unprecedented level of demand. All of this has contributed to soaring prices on agricultural exports from the South American nation.

Beyond rising import costs, Petersen also cited a potentially looming economic downturn as an aggravating factor in the growing demand for foodstuffs at home and abroad.

“When the economy starts seeing words like recession and so forth, people navigate to cheaper types of food; rice, soy product, grains,” Petersen said. “Rice kind of stayed at a decent price, but everybody’s navigating to rice because it’s the cheapest.”

That’s something that he says has put a strain on organizations like Mercy Meals that rely heavily on a combination of rice, soy and other grains for their prepared meals, which is exactly what’s happened in recent months, Wrenholt said.

“When I placed an order in mid-March, I was told they didn’t have everything to supply me, and so then I had to cancel groups for three to four weeks,” Wrenholt said.

Even when the necessary supplies can be procured, another difficulty Petersen has encountered is significantly extended wait times. For the vitamin mix, a necessary supplement to Mercy Meals’ soy-and-rice blend, usual two-week waiting periods have stretched to 10 weeks, a five-fold increase.

While many of these issues aren’t easily resolved, Petersen said farmers and business-owners across Northeast Nebraska can play a central role in easing the burden on supply by producing the needed foodstuffs locally.

He pointed to a planned soy crushing plant due north of Norfolk that could be outfitted with an extended line of production brought up to human food-grade standards.

The resultant output, Petersen said, could yield a profit of $1 to every 25 cents input. Though he estimated the addition would add close to 10% to the cost and would be feasible with help from a $4-5 million investor, Petersen said the real obstacle is the additional government regulations the plant would be subjected to as a result.

“(Government regulation) made it so difficult for (plant owner Nick Bowdish) just to get to that point that he has no desire to add this tiny little thing to his operation that will make him a four-fold profit,” Petersen said. “It just makes me look at the countries we send our food to, how much regulation is involved there and how many people literally starve to death because of it.”

Another challenge he pointed to is the monopolistic practices of big-business soy producers, who often push other competitors out of the market using their vast resources.

Petersen said a greater commitment also is needed in the production of other foodstuffs, and major local producers can’t be afraid to take risks.

“If we can just motivate some agricultural leaders to think a little further outside the box and not be afraid to make a long-term investment in things like oats,” Petersen said. “If we can get the city to just realize this is a good thing and not slow it down, I think that would help out a lot.”

Although food supplies remain scarce amid uncertainty and volatility in global markets, Wrenholt said the one thing that has never been lacking is a generous spirit of giving across the Norfolk community and beyond.

“The only way we can continue, since we’re a nonprofit, is total donations, and the Lord’s always been good to us to make sure that we’ve been covered,” Wrenholt said. “Everybody has such a good heart and wants to help out.”