

Commodity cooking

Huntington resident creates cookbook for people who receive assistance

By **ANGELA HENDERSON-BENTLEY**
For The Herald-Dispatch

HUNTINGTON — When her husband's health forced Myrtle Blair to give up her childcare business, she had to start relying on government commodities and food stamps to feed the two of them. But Blair has now found a way to repay what she has been given.

"I don't want to just be a taker. I want to give back to the community," Blair said.

Blair is in the early stages of putting together a cookbook of recipes using commodity foods for people who receive assistance.

"There is certainly a need. People who do not have computers do not have access to this information," Blair said. "I'm hoping that some of what I've learned over the years can get out to them."

When Blair first met with a caseworker to get her certificate to go to the food pantry, the caseworker told her how she had a lot of clients who didn't know how to cook with the commodities they were being given. Bags of dried beans are something that are always given, so the caseworker asked Blair if she could write something to tell people how to cook a pot of beans.

It turns out Blair was the perfect person to help because of her extensive food knowledge.

"I've been married for 63 years. I've been cooking all of those years for my family," she said. "I have a decade of experience in working with the United States Department of Agriculture menus with my child care."

The instructions Blair wrote were several pages long and covered everything from what kind of pot to use to how long you can store the beans after they're



Photos by Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch

Myrtle Blair of Huntington poses for a photo on Friday, April 8, at Huntington's Kitchen. Blair is putting together a healthy cookbook on things commonly available at area food pantries.



cooked. Blair then got a suggestion to talk to the Tri-State Literacy Council about how to improve the instructions to make them easier to read and understand.

"I was using the wrong words for them to use. So I started changing that,"

Blair said. "Then I started thinking of recipes that I could connect to this."

And that's when the idea of a cookbook of recipes using commodity foods was born. Blair is currently compiling recipes and starting to convert them.

Blair said she's learned

that if someone doesn't know how to use a certain commodity, they just throw it away. But she has a use for all of it.

"I read cookbooks like other people read novels," Blair said. "I have recipes for anything that they can give out."

For example, Blair said many people don't know what to do with powdered milk, but she has several recipes to make use of it.

"You can do your own biscuit mix. You can use your powdered milk to make your own pudding mix," she said.

Blair said with a blender, you can reconstitute the powdered milk and use it to make things like whipped topping.

Substitutions will be an important part of the cookbook.

"A lot of the recipes call for things that they don't have," she said. "There are

ways to use mayonnaise for cooking if you don't have eggs. It's years of research and knowledge and sharing."

The Literacy Council also asked Blair about teaching a class to show people how to cook with the commodities.

"There's enthusiasm everywhere and with everyone I've talked to that work in the field with the food," Blair said.

The suggestion of teaching classes led Blair to Huntington's Kitchen, where she immediately found a kindred spirit in kitchen manager Andie Leffingwell.

"She and I just clicked," Blair said. "We were meant to be together."

Leffingwell was happy to see someone willing to fill a need in the community.

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"I've heard the comment, 'Well they give me such and such but we don't eat that or I can't cook that or I don't even know how to cook that,'" she said. "I get those comments a good bit."

Huntington's Kitchen has been offering classes to adults who qualify for commodities, but not classes on how to cook with the items.

"There are not a lot of these things that are on my menu," Leffingwell said. "We're collecting these menus from a program and we're collecting this food from another program and they don't match.

"So if someone could teach recipes that matches that, wouldn't that be so much more beneficial for someone who has to use it," Leffingwell added. "So I was really thrilled about it because I think that can make a big difference."

Blair will be observing classes at the kitchen for the next few weeks to see how the program works, and then she hopes to start teaching her own class.

"I'm kind of a conduit," Blair said. "I'm getting it and I'm hoping to give it to other people who are interested."

The cookbook will take Blair at least a year to put together and she is hoping to find people who are willing to help with both the preparation and the cost of it.

"I want the cookbook to be free and available to the people that want it and are using these products," Blair said.

"I will get nothing for this but my time and the enjoyment of doing it. This is not something for me to make a profit on," she said. "I'm learning, and I'm giving something back."

For more information about Huntington's Kitchen and its classes or how to help with the cookbook project, call 304-522-0887.