TARRANT OFFICER'S GOOD DEED

TARRANT, Alabama - Helen Johnson stared in amazement at the piles of food accumulating in her small Tarrant apartment on Wednesday.

"The last time I saw my house this full, I was 12-years-old and staying with my grandmother," said the 47-year-old mother and grandmother. "I've been crying all day."

On Wednesday, Tarrant police delivered two truckloads of groceries to the woman, who on Saturday was caught stealing five eggs from the nearby Dollar General. Instead of arresting Johnson, Tarrant Police Officer William Stacy bought her a carton of eggs and sent her home with the promise to never shoplift again.

That in itself, Johnson said, was a blessing. But those blessings now seem to have taken on a life of their own. Tarrant police said they've received calls from across the United States and world since hearing of Johnson's plight. People have offered food, money and clothing.
It's been so overwhelming, said Tarrant Police Chief Dennis Reno, he had to bring in a second police dispatcher to handle the volume of calls. Police officials today also set up a fund at People’s First Federal Credit Union on Ford Avenue in Tarrant to benefit the Johnson family.

"It's growing and growing and growing," Reno said. "A guy called me from New York and just broke down. He said for two months he’s been angry with police, and he said this has totally changed his mind."

A food bank from Memphis is set to arrive in Tarrant this evening. "This woman's getting plenty of food," the chief said. "She shouldn't be hungry for a while."

What a difference a week makes. Johnson's two daughters, a niece and two grandchildren, ages 1 and 3, live with her in their Tarrant home. The kids' mother gets a welfare check - $120 a month - but that check was lost in the mail. Johnson herself gets a disability check, which is set to come this week.

By Saturday, the family had gone two days without food. Johnson went to Dollar General on Pinson Valley Parkway with $1.25 and thought that would be enough to buy a carton of eggs. When she realized she was 50 cents plus tax short, she stuffed five eggs in her pocket out of desperation.

She didn't get far. "Of course when I put them in my jacket pocket they broke," Johnson said in an earlier interview. "I'm not a good thief at all."

A store worker stopped Johnson and asked her if she had taken the eggs. She said she did, and they said they had already called the police.

By the time she got to the door, Tarrant police Officer William Stacy was there, and told her to stay put. The officer said he'd already talked to Dollar General officials and they said they weren't going to press charges.

Johnson didn't know that, and said she was waiting for him to bring out the handcuffs. Instead, he went into the store and came back out with a carton of eggs. "She started crying, she got very emotional and was very apologetic," Stacy said. "She tried to give me the money she had on her, $1.25."

Johnson said she was stunned. "I was like, 'Oh my God, thank you Jesus for this man,'” she said. "He is my hero."
Stacy said he can remember times growing up when his mother had trouble finding ways to feed him and his sister. He had been on a call to Johnson's house once before, and had gotten a glimpse of the living conditions. The furnishings are sparse, and the family sleeps on mattresses on the floor.

"The story she told me Saturday matched up with what I had seen when I was there," he said. "I felt like it was the right thing to do. I didn't want to pass judgment on her."

She asked how she could repay him, and he told her to not shoplift again. "Sometimes the best route is to not arrest," Stacy said. "I hope she won't do it again. I pray she doesn't, and I don't think she will."

Johnson asked Stacy if she could hug him, and he said yes. Unbeknownst to both of them, a man named Robert "Dollar" Tripp filmed the scene on his cell phone and later posted it on his Facebook with the hashtag "feelgoodstoryoftheday."

The story went viral. On Tuesday, Tarrant police showed up at her home. "I was shook and so scared," she said. "I thought it was about the eggs. My grandbaby said, 'Are you going to jail?' and I said I hoped not."

Instead, Tarrant police took Johnson to headquarters, where they signed her up for the annual Tarrant Toy Drive, and also are helping to coordinate the offers of food and clothing also pouring in, said Tarrant police Sgt. Larry Rice.

On Wednesday, Stacy and Officer Jay Jenkins took two loads of food to Johnson's apartment. She couldn't stop crying, and she couldn't stop hugging Stacy. "I just busted out and started hollering," Johnson said of all the food delivered to her home. "I was yelling so loud. I would have been a good cheerleader."

With help from a nearby church, Johnson spent much of Wednesday reorganizing her kitchen cabinets to make room for all the food. The family, who by Tuesday was down to one slice of bread, had their pick of what to eat.


Her grandchildren were also happy to see the officers at their apartment. "You back?" said 3-year-old Tamarose, as she grabbed various cans of food to show the family.

Asked what she would do if someone else in need asked her for a slice of bread, she said, "I
would give them the whole loaf. And then I would give them Officer Stacy’s number.”

Johnson said her life is forever changed because of the actions of Stacy and the Tarrant Police Department. “My heart,” she said, “is wide open right now.”