

## Combatting #periodpoverty and Learning Along the Way

Helping Women Period started after two friends, Lysne Tait and Amy Stephenson, read an article about #periodpoverty in the *Huffington Post*. Discovering this need was the first of many surprises.

They thought they'd do a one-time fundraiser to collect period supplies for homeless women in Lansing, Michigan. That's not what happened. The pair posted on Facebook about their plans to hold a benefit breakfast and invited 30 people. In two days, they had 100 supporters signing up to come. In two more days, they'd collected so much money that they felt they needed to incorporate as a nonprofit.

They also thought that support would come overwhelmingly from other women. They were wrong about that too, said Lysne, who is now executive director of the organization. Lysne drove out to a rural town where she spoke to an almost all-male Kiwanis meeting. "They're not going to be interested," she thought. But the universal response in the room was: "How can we help you?" After the meeting, she stopped at a restaurant, only to see a Kiwanis member talking with the fellow behind the counter about #periodpoverty.

The third abandoned assumption revolved around the people they would be serving, women, as the organization's name clearly states. But Lysne and Amy have since changed their mission from providing "feminine hygiene products" to homeless or low-income "women" to providing "period supplies" to homeless or low-income "people."

"In September, I'm going to go teach a class at the local LGBTQ community center on what it means to be trans with a period," she said.

Transgender people who menstruate face multiple barriers, she explained, including bathroom stalls without trash receptacles, period underwear that's only available in women's cuts and even the noise of unwrapping a period product, which some people report can "out" them in a men's restroom. Making the organization's language inclusive is one way to support trans people who menstruate, and Lysne is looking for other opportunities.

Lysne recruited her first volunteers and donors the way most people do, through her own network of personal contacts. She approached a man who ran a janitorial supply company because "my kids were in band and his kids were in band." The father of two daughters was "gobsmacked" when he learned about #periodpoverty and agreed to sell products at cost to fill the need in schools. Helping Women Period has raised money to put 13 free distribution machines in school restrooms.

After joining the Alliance for Period Supplies, the organization got a donation of U by Kotex pads, which they will send home with students in need. Lysne said that she's reserving the U by Kotex products for



people with ongoing need because they are higher in quality than the emergency supplies provided by schools.

In addition to schools, Helping Women Period works with distribution partners that serve homeless and low-income people. Those organizations are finding that they are using less toilet paper, because it isn't being used as a substitute for period supplies. The organization is big on making sure that people have the appropriate product to meet their needs. For example, they started stocking incontinence products after learning from a food bank that people were using period supplies for bladder control problems.

In some circumstances, the period supplies are distributed in beautiful cloth bags that are handmade by volunteers. Volunteers are one resource that Helping Women Period has never been short on.

“When we explain what we do, it just hits people really hard,” Lysne said, “And they want to help.”

