



From a building that once housed a propane company (top left), Filling Station board members like Clyde Murphy Jr. and Willie Smith keep the spirit of downtown Pollocksville and Jones County alive by helping clean up after disasters and assist residents in need.

# SHELTER

*from the*

# STORM

In the tiny town of Pollocksville in Jones County, the placid Trent River roared to life during Hurricane Florence, threatening homes and businesses. A group of volunteers formed to clean up the mess, one neighborly smile at a time.

*written by* JILL WARREN LUCAS / *photography by* CHRIS ROGERS

**A** FEW WEEKS AFTER Hurricane Florence devastated Jones County in September 2018, Millie Belfort couldn't resist the urge to take a walk down to the Trent River. She was stunned to see that the churning flood waters that had rushed beyond its muddy banks still lapped up Main Street, swamping her adopted hometown of Pollocksville.

Uneasy about wading into the polluted water, she watched as a group of people gathered just outside of a former propane business, near the spot where the surge had stopped. "I didn't know what it was, but I wanted to be part of it," recalls Belfort, who'd moved to the town from Connecticut 13 years earlier, drawn to the rural community by its milder weather.

The group that Belfort encountered consisted of leaders and volunteers from The Filling Station, a nonprofit headquartered in the old store and composed of local churches and service organizations that support neighbors in need. No meeting had been planned, but several locals had gravitated there to share their concerns. Belfort told of how she'd experienced price gouging when charged \$21 for one jar each of peanut butter and jelly.

"This gentleman in the group said, 'Hold on.' He went back in and got me a jar of peanut butter



POLLOCKSVILLE MAYOR  
JAY BENDER

and a jar of jelly — no charge,” Belfort recalls. “He told me he was sorry that I had to go through that. It was like a gleam of light in the darkness.”

The volunteers, she says, “helped us all come together and heal. A lot of people have the intention to do good. They made it happen.”

When The Filling Station set up its board five months prior to the hurricane, the goal was to ensure that residents of the low-wealth county could put food on their tables. No one could have foreseen the need that would soon arise. But after overcoming the challenges that Florence threw in their path, members of the group saw that they could do more to lift up their hard-hit community.

They soon expanded their programs, offering summer camps, a tutoring service, and a learning academy to strengthen the pipeline of future leaders. From 2019 to 2023, the number of households that volunteers served more than doubled, from just under 4,000 to nearly 9,000. Fueled by the can-do enthusiasm of its executive director, Pollocksville native Mary Ann LeRay, The Filling Station has continued to adapt, finding new ways to nourish its neighbors.



**“A lot of people have the intention to do good. The volunteers at The Filling Station made it happen.”**

**THE ORGANIZATION HELD ITS FIRST DRIVE-THROUGH** food pantry under clear skies on September 6, 2018. A week later, as Pollocksville Mayor Jay Bender monitored warnings for the large, slow-moving storm, he found himself pondering lessons learned from Hurricane Floyd, which hit the town 25 years ago this month. Experts called it a thousand-year storm, but Florence would prove to be worse. Days of record-breaking rain pushed a 20-foot rush of foul water up Main Street, overtaking everything in its path before stopping — miraculously, some say — at the steps of Pollocksville Presbyterian Church.

More than 750 families across Jones County, most without flood insurance, were forced to evacuate. Some never returned, and Pollocksville’s business corridor remains mostly shuttered. Folks who never imagined that they’d require food assistance, who were displaced or needed help mucking out their flooded homes, were desperate for aid.

It took about 10 days for floodwaters to recede enough for Mayor Bender to access his riverside office in the old town hall, which had been submerged to the rafters. With doors swollen shut, he used a chain saw to gain access through a window. Despite the care he’d taken to stack essential government documents and equipment atop folding tables, the murky water claimed countless records and keepsakes that documented generations of life in Jones County. Officials later estimated statewide damage from Florence at \$17 billion.

With local government operating out of his living room, Bender grew concerned about the time

**Executive Director Mary Ann LeRay (left) oversees operations at The Filling Station, where food is distributed to clients via a drive-through pantry (above).**





Volunteers and community members cook together at The Filling Station as part of a NC Cooperative Extension program called Take Control. In June, Reece Carter (below) won a Governor's Volunteer Service Award.

it would take even highly motivated state and federal officials to respond. What he needed was a central location where folks could come for aid. He needed The Filling Station, and LeRay — someone with deep roots in the community — was ready for his call. At Bender's request, The Filling Station became Jones County's disaster recovery hub.

"We really had no choice," LeRay says with a smile that's capable of both soothing heartbreak and brokering critical partnerships. "We were one of the few places still dry."

**ALTHOUGH NO ONE PREDICTED THE** severity of Florence's impact, LeRay recalls a compelling sense of urgency among The Filling Station's board in the months leading up to the storm.

"We felt like we were preparing for something important," she says. "Our training and our contacts were critical to serving people of all ages and walks of life when they most needed us."

LeRay's drive comes from both her mother and her father, tobacco farmers who instilled in her the belief that you commit to a task until it's done. LeRay likewise inspired fellow responders, many of whom had experienced significant storm loss themselves.

"Somehow, somehow, things were orchestrated for us to respond," she says. "We knew that we had to get it together, identify needs, and get things done without a lot of red tape."

**"Some people think rural counties can't achieve, but we can sit at the table and belong."**

Early interventions included hand-delivering financial relief — much of it donated through the nonprofit's new website — to more than 125 families who'd lost everything. When the holidays approached, Filling Station volunteers returned with gift cards provided by corporate partners.

While some in Jones County were still dealing with hurricane recovery, The Filling Station continued to expand its reach. It helped clients access services and adjust to isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its offices house a ham radio station — a vital resource when other communications are down. And construction will begin soon on a warehouse funded by the Golden LEAF Foundation to expand the food pantry.

It also has a teaching kitchen operated in partnership with the Jones County Center of the NC Cooperative Extension. Jacob Morgan, the county's extension director, says that the space is used to realize opportunities that the nonprofit creates for the community. "It's given us a chance to meet and serve people in a different manner," Morgan says. Classes have ranged from how to make the best use of seasonal produce to preserving deer meat as a shelf-stable resource to



teaching dinner party etiquette to 4-H youth, who prepared and served a meal to county commissioners.

**THE FILLING STATION HAS NEVER BEEN AT** a loss for helpers. Based in a town with more than 200 residents, more than two-thirds that number of people committed to about 5,000 volunteer hours last year. Those eager to do more have access to the Leadership Jones academy's training, which nurtures cohorts of hometown heroes. A fourth class begins the six-week program this month, with participants likely to follow their peers in local leadership roles.

Belfort, who learned of The Filling Station during that fateful walk by the Trent River, completed the program last year. "I learned a lot about how governments and organizations work," she says. Belfort herself relied on The Filling Station for assistance when she lost her job, her car, and her mother within a four-month period during the pandemic. "It helped me to be less critical of agencies' limitations and focus on how we can all participate to help our community grow."

Theresa Chadwick Lee likes to hear testimonies like that. Retired from a career of facilitating relationships between local governments and non-profits, Lee returns to her hometown to deliver the course to new advocates. "Some people think rural counties can't achieve," she says, "but we can sit at the table and belong. People who chose to root here are making a difference."

Last spring, Reece Carter, now 14, became the program's youngest graduate. A food pantry volunteer and home-schooled student who works with his dad in a family-owned handyman business, Carter says that the training has inspired him to think long-term about ways he can serve his community. "I'm glad that they're not treating me like a kid," he says. "I feel like they are interested in my ideas, and they make me want to do more to help my town."

**LERAY AND HER HUSBAND, JEREMY, SPENT** 20 years after college living in Colorado.

## FILL 'ER UP!

The Filling Station will hold its annual "A Perfect 10" fundraiser from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on October 19, rain or shine, at locations along 10 Mile Fork Road in Jones County. Highlights include hayrides, farm tours, and a chance to interact with animals; a yesteryear museum; arts and crafts; music and food trucks; and cow pie bingo. For \$10 tickets or to make a donation, visit [fillingstation1075.com/jones-county-a-perfect-10-event](http://fillingstation1075.com/jones-county-a-perfect-10-event).

While they adored the mountain life, LeRay always knew she'd return to Jones County, where her grandfather had established a large family farm.

"I felt a heaviness on my heart to move back and give back," she says. "My granddaddy used to say, 'No matter where you go, Jones County is the greatest place.' It's part of me."

Currently, she's focused on getting more portable defibrillators for the fire trucks to compensate for the fact that the 473-square-mile county has just one ambulance. "It's another example of where we need to be empowering and equipping our neighbors to respond, and it's working," she says. "It's been awesome to watch people learn how to collaborate for the good of Jones County."

LeRay had intended to serve only briefly as The Filling Station's executive director, and then hand over the position to someone else. Ten years after joining the multi-church board that conceived the organization, she can't imagine doing anything else. The job, she says, "was the call of my life." **Og**

*Jill Warren Lucas is a writer based in Raleigh.*

**THE FILLING STATION**  
221 Main Street  
Pollocksville, NC 28573  
(252) 224-1127  
[fillingstation1075.com](http://fillingstation1075.com)

