



ROBERT HANASHIRO FOR USA WEEKEND

FACES OF HUNGER

More and more Americans don't have enough to eat, and food banks struggle to keep up with the demand **BY MARISOL BELLO**

The first time Nikki Maxwell walked into the food pantry of her Los Angeles-area neighborhood for a bag of groceries, it felt like the weight of the world was lifted off her shoulders.

It was the height of the recent recession and she had lost work as a consultant writing grants for non-profit agencies. Her husband's work as a writer for videogames dried up too. They had few job prospects. They had run through their savings and 401(k) and had no more money to pay the rent.

The couple and their three children had to move out, and they bounced from house to house of every relative

and friend who could help. And worse, Maxwell didn't know from day to day if they would have the money to feed their children. Her husband skipped meals or they gave up portions of their meals to give to the kids. "I remember feeling really hopeless," she says. "I was depressed. I didn't know what to do. I was drowning under the weight of it."

She found some relief at the SOVA Community Food and Resource Program in Van Nuys. "I was sad that I was in this place, but at

the same time, I was hopeful that there is support."

Maxwell, 44, and her family are among the 49 million Americans who live in households that are at risk of hunger. That's about one in six people. Of those, 16 million are children.

Food bank directors say that since

the start of the recession in 2009, they have seen an increase in families with children, the working poor in particular, and seniors. Many are people who've lost jobs, some are college educated and had been middle class, and others are seniors on fixed incomes who can't afford the rising costs of health care, food or utilities.

"It's pretty bad," says Katy Bunder,

"I didn't know what to do."

executive director of Food Finders Food Bank in Lafayette, Ind. She says the food bank broke records last year for the number of meals distributed with almost 6 million. Six years ago, the food bank served about 2 million meals.

To respond to the increase, food banks have provided more mobile pantries and created backpack pro-

grams for children to take food home on the weekends during the school year. Bender says her food bank serves 4,000 children in its backpack program, up from 200 when it started six years ago. The overall need is so high, Bender says it's not unusual for people to stand in line for hours in 10-degree weather to get a laundry basket full of food.

In Minneapolis, Second Harvest Heartland has seen a 26% increase in people visiting its food pantries from 2012 to 2013, to 400,000 people. Rob Zeaske, Second Harvest CEO, says the people who come to the food bank have lost jobs, had hours cut at their current jobs or found jobs at lower wages. "That's the story underneath," he says. Many of the newcomers are working but are unable to make ends meet.

Today, Maxwell and her husband work part time for a Los Angeles non-profit that helps American Indians, making less than half what they used to earn. Their income fluctuates, so sometimes they earn too much to receive food stamps. Monthly visits to the food pantry help supplement their meals with noodles, peanut butter, beans, fruits and vegetables.

"Recovery is a slow process," Maxwell says. "There are a lot of people in crisis." ▣