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## Erie UpLink Feeds Students During Spring Break

By Whitney Bryen

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As St. Vrain Valley School District revs up for spring break, an Erie nonprofit is preparing to feed more than 100 student who will be without free and reduced school lunches during the break next week.

About 25 students from Erie and Niwot High Schools stuffed microwaveable macaroni and cheese, granola bars, oatmeal, ramen noodles and beef jerky into orange and black backpacks Tuesday night for the 5-year-old nonprofit Erie UpLink.

“Most of these kids are going to be home alone or staying with Grandma or Grandpa, while Mom and Dad are at work; these packs provide a meal for them when pantries might be empty.” – Lexi Cire, Erie UpLink Co-founder

The backpacks, called Tiger Packs, will be sent home with 105 students at six Erie schools later this week in preparation for spring break, which begins Monday for SVVSD.

For more info visit: [erieuplink.org](http://erieuplink.org)

“Most of these kids are going to be home alone or staying with Grandma or Grandpa, while Mom and Dad are at work,” said Lexi Cire, one of the founders of Erie UpLink. “These packs provide a meal for them when pantries might be empty.”

Tiger Packs — the nonprofit’s flagship project — were the inspiration behind the organization launched in February 2011 by Erie moms Stephanie Short, Lisa Knudsen and Cire.



From left: Luis Olivas, 16; Travis Cochran, 17; and Sarah Fritche, 17, help stuff backpacks with food in the basement of Erie resident Lisa Knudsen

When Cire’s son, Zane, was in fifth grade at Erie Elementary School he began asking for more and more food every day. Eventually, Zane admitted that he was sharing his lunch with friends whose lunch funds had run out before the end of the month, leaving them without meals.

After Cire filled in Short and Knudsen, the team decided to take action, and Erie UpLink was born with the group’s first 11 Tiger Packs.

“The most important thing about Tiger Packs is that it’s Erie kids feeding Erie kids,” Knudsen said.

Now, the nonprofit is supplying Tiger Packs throughout the school year to 105 kids at Red Hawk Elementary School, Erie Elementary School, Black Rock Elementary School, Aspen Ridge Prep School, Erie Middle School and Erie High School. Donations are brought in through food drives held throughout the school year.

The packs are repacked by volunteers and sent home with students about once a month to help provide food for weekends and school holidays when meals may otherwise be missed.

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## Erie UpLink Feeds Students During Spring Break, cont.

“When you think of Erie, the median income is fairly high and we’re mostly middle-to-upper class,” Cire said. “But there’s this poverty pocket in Old Town, right in the center of town that has a lot of trailer parks, where rent is expensive, and there aren’t a ton of jobs. Those kids are pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, and we want to help them do that.”

Carrie Mitchell, an English teacher at Erie High, organized about a dozen students from the school’s Teens with Wings charity group to help pack bags for their peers this week.

Mitchell said the community service provides an outlet for the volunteers to learn to be selfless while meeting the needs of area teens.

“It’s a lot different in high school. There’s such a pride factor,” Mitchell said. “We have to work hard to ID the kids who have a need but then try not to acknowledge their tough times. You just have to be really sneaky at the high school level.”

Erie UpLink has also partnered with other area nonprofits such as A Woman’s Work and Collegiate Crossing to assist local moms, provide college guidance to high schoolers, offer camps for low-income students and supply basic needs for families in a bind.

One of Cire’s favorite stories is about a newly divorced Erie dad whom the nonprofit helped with clothes, haircuts and camp fees for his three children.

About a year later, the man wrote a letter to the organization thanking them for the help and sent a check that sent 25 students to a camp last summer.

“Everything we do goes back to the community feeding the community,” Knudsen said.

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