

Special Delivery

What started as an exercise in charity for needy babies has become a cherished tradition for two generations of moms and daughters



It's not yet 9 A.M. and Carla Nowak, 43, has already gotten her son off to kindergarten and driven her minivan 35 miles to a Chicago supermarket. Her sister, Fran Snyder, and their cousin, Lisa Iberle, pull up alongside her and start loading 40 cases of infant formula into their vans. Inside the store, their family friend Dorothy Clarke is purchasing as many as 20 additional cases of formula.



Moms to the rescue: Clockwise, from top: "junior" Bridget Rohde and son Joseph; treasurer Lisa Iberle with co-founder Jinny Lamer Mayer; co-founder Joan Vering; Carla Nowak, Dorothy Clarke, Rohde, Vering and Lamer Mayer

Just how many mouths do these women need to feed? Well, that depends. They're collecting for INFANT, Inc. (Infants Need to Find Adequate Nourishment Today), a charity founded by Clarke, Joan Iberle (Carla and Fran's mom) and four other friends, all members of the 1949 class of Chicago's Immaculata High School. It's been 20 years since the women began buying formula from local grocery stores and delivering it

to shelters throughout Chicago. Back then it was to fulfill a well-publicized need: Funding for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the federal grant program, was in great danger of being cut, potentially leaving children in shelters hungry. Today, the problem of hunger isn't as talked about, but these women will be the first to tell you it still exists.

Now, to coincide with INFANT,

Inc.'s special anniversary, the women are passing the charity onto a group they've dubbed "the juniors"—their daughters, daughters-in-law, nieces and friends—and hoping this next generation will be able to keep up with the current demand. In 2002 alone, INFANT, Inc., supplied 3,537 cases of infant formula, as well as 86 layettes to 50 different social-service agencies. The juniors

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PHOTOS: JOHN BRENNAN

won't be taking over without experience, though: They've been helping with the monthly deliveries for the last five years.

"When my mom and her friends started this, I thought it was cool, but it was their project," says Nowak, who assumed INFANT's presidency back in March. "When they first asked us to help out, we thought we'd be helping just with the physical demands of carrying the formula. We never thought we were going to take over the organization."

But as the juniors became more and more involved, they observed that INFANT, Inc., was almost as beneficial to the women who run it as it is to those who receive its bounty. Driving through some of the city's poorest neighborhoods with one another for the last two decades has forged a strong bond among the seniors, who have the opportunity to catch up on each other's lives as

they make deliveries. As Joan Vering, another founder, puts it, "We haven't just been each other's friends, we've been each other's therapists."

Nowak, a trained chef

and stay-at-home mom, says she could only really appreciate what her mother and her friends did once she started helping out. "I never would have had enough initiative to start something like this," she says. "I'm one of those people who says, 'someone should do something about this,' but never does it. Our moms really *did* something about it."

The way they do it has become routine: Once a month, the women begin by loading their vans with formula, which is purchased with cash contributions, at the supermarket. They stop by Clarke's house, where they add any other donations they've received, such as diapers or Children's Tylenol. (These extras vary from month to month, but there are typically enough to fill 10 grocery bags.)

Founder Barbara Isaacson assem-

minuscule figure virtually unheard of elsewhere in philanthropy.

"People feel connected

to us in a way that they don't to other charities," says Lisa, an accountant who now oversees INFANT's books. "They know that the money is really going to do what we say it will. But they also know who we are because we're part of the community. These women went to school together, go to

church together, and so when collections went down for other charities in 2002, people still gave to us."

After they finish their deliveries, the entire group bonds over lunch at an Italian restaurant. Gathered around a long table, Iberle says she hopes the next generation of women will grow as close as their mothers, even though they live in more complicated times and in a number of far-flung suburbs, rather than in one city



"INFANT helps other women, but it helps us, too," says Nowak (back row, first from left), surrounded here by the INFANT, Inc., team on delivery day

neighborhood like the seniors. Clarke passes around a stack of recent thank-you cards while recalling the triplets who were once turned away from WIC, and likely saved by INFANT, Inc. Photos of the boys, now in college, are kept at Clarke's house, amid other grateful notes. Vering marvels at how a snowfall predicted for that day failed to materialize. In two decades, INFANT has never been stopped by a single snowstorm. "We've been blessed," she says, sitting among her lifelong friends, clearly referring to more than the weather.