



Lifting Appalachia

Joe Burrow's Heisman speech sparks a movement

STORY BY BAILEY FINK
PHOTOS BY MORRIS WEIN AND PROVIDED

On December 14, Heisman winner and Athens native Joe Burrow gave a speech at the 2019 Heisman Trophy ceremony highlighting the food insecurity in Southeast Ohio. One month later, over half a million dollars had been raised for the Athens County Food Pantry through a Facebook fundraiser created by Will Drabold.

After hearing Burrow's speech, Drabold, an Ohio University (Athens) graduate and Athens resident, felt the need to act after the excitement generated by the speech. Drabold created a fundraising page on Facebook for the Athens County Food Pantry. He originally set a goal of \$1,000, but within a couple of hours, donated funds surpassed that amount.

"We watched [Burrow's speech] on TV, and I was sitting there, and when he said the Southeast Ohio part [it] really gripped me. I stood up [and] walked toward the TV; it was sort of crazy," Drabold says. "I think it's powerful to focus on how much people identified with what Joe said, who had the means to give back."

Donations came pouring in from across the country. Drabold says he doesn't know exactly where they came from, but he's sure most of the donations came from Ohio and Louisiana, where quarterback Burrow would lead the Louisiana State University Tigers to the 2020 NCAA Football Championship.

LEFT: A mural congratulating and thanking Joe Burrow on the graffiti wall on the Ohio University (Athens) campus.



ABOVE: The Burrow family (left to right): Jimmy, Joe and Robin Burrow in their LSU gear.

Drabold recalls a visit to Gigi's Country Kitchen in The Plains. The owner described customers refreshing the Facebook donation page that Sunday. "People were yelling out, 'Oh, it's at 20,000 now, it's at 25, it's 30...'" he says.

The fundraiser concluded at the end of January with over \$510,000 raised. In addition to Drabold's fundraiser, other fundraisers were created around Southeast Ohio, including one for The Plains Elementary School, which raised over \$4,000.

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- Will Drabold

"I did not think this was going to raise \$510,000. It's incredible to see the community turned out for this and have so many people thank me and everything, but I'm not surprised that it happened," Drabold says.

In January, the donations began arriving at the food pantry and the organization saw an influx of community members using its resources. In Athens, 400 households are usually served a month, says Karin Bright, the president of the Athens County Food Pantry, but in December, they served about 20% more.

"When you hear what Joe said, you just instantly know it's true that there's a really large population, [a] significant percentage of people in this area who have very, very little. I mean, paycheck to paycheck doesn't begin to describe it. It's food stamp to food stamp; it's food pantry to food pantry," Drabold says.

Before this, the organization's annual budget had been an average of \$60,000, according to *The Marietta Times*. The food pantry is now deciding how to best allocate this tremendous influx of money to fight hunger and food insecurity.

Burrow's speech hasn't only affected Athens. Drabold says it has spurred conversation among local, regional and state leaders about how to address the issue in Southeast Ohio.

"All of this discussion and all this good stuff is from a few lines [from] Joe in a speech that he didn't even mean to have this impact with. So, he hasn't done anything intentionally, yet imagine what it'll look like and how the community will follow him and respond when he does do something specific, methodical, etc. It's sort of exciting to imagine," Drabold says.

In the meantime, while Burrow focused on the NFL draft, where he was drafted first overall by the Cincinnati Bengals, his parents Robin, a principal at Eastern Elementary School in Meigs County, and Jimmy, the former defensive coordinator for Ohio Football at OHIO, worked to continue raising money. Since Joe's speech, the family has created the Joe Burrow Fund through the Athens County Foundation. The fund is to help other counties in Southeast Ohio, in addition to Athens.

Additionally, the iconic photo of Joe smoking a cigar after the National Championship win has raised extra money. Jimmy says that a percentage of the proceeds generated from T-shirts and paintings that feature the photo go toward charities in Athens and Baton Rouge.

"Thirty-one seconds of Joe's speech was devoted to [raising money], and I guess the lesson is powerful words spoken from an influential person can make a big difference," Jimmy says. 🍷

Athens County Food Pantry

Phone: (740) 590-7051

The Food Line: 1-(800) 338-4484

Address: 528 Richland Ave #3748, Athens 45701

Hours: Monday and Wednesday 9 a.m. to 10 a.m.

Mailing Address: Athens County Food Pantry, c/o Treasurer, 9 N. College St, Athens 45701

Website: athenscountyfoodpantry.org