

'Labels' Concept Promotes Engagement

Labels Are For Jars is a cutting-edge effort that's successfully fighting hunger in urban America. The nonprofit raises money to feed thousands of hungry people by selling thought-provoking products that undermine societal labeling.

In a society where people constantly label one another, the organization's shirts and caps take some commonly used labels – such as “addict,” “geek” and “slacker” – and put them right in people's faces. This draws a lot of attention and questions, which open up the opportunity to explain that the product is raising money to feed hungry people.

To date, Labels Are For Jars has raised more than a million dollars to help build and operate the Cor Unum Meal Center in Lawrence. In its first year of operations, Cor Unum has served more than 100,000 meals and expects to serve more than 200,000 meals in this second year of operations.



Tracy E. Murphy is a board member and Central Committee member of Labels Are For Jars.

Q. How did the idea for Labels Are For Jars come about, and how did the organization come together?

A. Labels Are For Jars is the brainchild of a team that includes late-night funnyman Conan O'Brien, **Red Sox** [team stats] first baseman Sean Casey, celebrated brand designer Mike Toth, and Father Paul B. O'Brien.

Not many people know that Lawrence is one of the poorest cities in the United States, and that 75 percent of children in this city are at risk for hunger. It's a sad reality that children go to bed hungry. They wake up hungry, and they go to school on an empty stomach. When kids are hungry, how can they be expected to perform well in school? They can't, and they don't. Something needed to change.

Immersed in Lawrence, Father Paul O'Brien witnessed the effects of hunger on his community and was compelled to do something about it. He inspired others to come on board and established a working Central Committee for Labels Are For Jars.

A project that started as a friends and family network of community and businesses leaders has grown into a very effective selfless group that believes in the goal and is directly responsible for the success of Labels Are For Jars.

Q. Tell us about your product.

A. In addition to 11 uniquely “labeled” T-shirts, our product line features the Labels Skull Cap by John Varvatos, personally created by one of today's most celebrated fashion designers.

The cap actually made its debut during Fashion Week in New York last year. The black wool cap has a “hungry” label on the front and the Labels Are For Jars and John Varvatos logos on the back. It’s not your ordinary fundraising vehicle for sure, but we see it as a unique opportunity to get people engaged and talking about societal labeling while raising money to feed hungry people.

Specifically, we want to engage young adults because we believe they have the most opportunity to introduce change.

Q. How does Labels Are For Jars exist if 100 percent of profits are given to Cor Unum?

A. Labels Are For Jars began via bootstrap funding. Almost immediately after introducing Labels to the market, we began receiving private donations and became profitable. We have no paid employees, very little overhead, and we are humbled by the generosity of our supporters.

Our first run of shirts was paid out of pocket and now sales of the product line cover the cost of production so all of the profits support Cor Unum.

Q. How are you keeping the momentum going?

A. To raise the visibility of our project and keep momentum going we continue to be as creative as possible in developing partnerships and celebrity endorsements.

Most recently, we introduced our wildly successful “rock star” labeled T-shirt inspired by local musicians Bang Camaro. We launched “rock star” at a local screening of the extreme sports film, “Lost and Found,” whose soundtrack features Bang Camaro. Additionally, the band performed live at the event and several members sported Labels gear on stage.

We have benefited from some great local and national media attention. We hope to develop similar partnerships where the artist inspires the label or perhaps inspires us to extend the product line.

From the NFL to skateboarding, we are also developing similar partnerships with professional athletes. Major League Baseball All-Star and Central Committee member Sean Casey is a great example of how quickly the energy and enthusiasm of an athlete inspires people into action.

One of our supporters recently donated a much needed food refrigeration truck that’s used to transport food donated from the Greater Boston Food Bank to Cor Unum. Our friends at Toth Brand Imaging designed a cool Labels Are For Jars wrap that now covers the truck. It’s our very own traveling billboard. So if you happen to see the Labels Are For Jars truck on the road, give a honk!

Q. What’s next for Labels Are For Jars?

A. Labels Are For Jars will continue to raise money for Cor Unum, which will be expanding hours to include lunch. The fact that there is a living, breathing meal center attached to Labels now is a very powerful thing. It’s really cool to see people make the connection – buying a shirt that helps feed hungry people.