

# Lincoln playwright takes on child hunger with musical



2 hours ago • By [Cory Matteson | Lincoln Journal Star](#)

There's a lot to like, statistically, about Lincoln. Throw a dart at a map of the U.S., and odds are strong that Lincoln's unemployment rate is lower than wherever it landed. Housing prices, crime rates and cost of living are also comparably low. Volunteer rates and workforce participation are comparably high.

Bill Stephan, executive director of the Lied Center, sat in on a presentation early last year of these and other Lincoln Vital Signs, as the collaborative fact-finding effort was called. There was plenty of good news, but there were also some staggering surprises. One fact that stood out to him -- 44 percent of Lincoln Public Schools students participated in the free or reduced price lunch program. Since 2000, there's been a 133 percent increase in the number of students who qualify for and receive free lunches.

"While the report revealed a long list of accomplishments and positive data, we were surprised to learn that a staggering number of Lincoln children aren't getting enough to eat," Stephan said.

Soon after that, while on a work trip to L.A., Stephan, Lincoln playwright Becky Boesen and Petra Wahlqvist, education and community engagement director at the Lied Center, talked about the hunger statistics over lunch. It reminded Boesen of a news story she'd seen about school administrators in Utah taking food-filled trays from students with deficient lunch accounts and throwing them in the trash.

"Petra and I were so angry," Boesen said. "We're both moms and artists. If there's ever an opportunity to address food insecurity through a theatrical production, we wanted to do that."

Real-life tragedies have inspired many of Boesen's works. She wrote "In My Daughter's Name" after reading about a domestic violence-based death and then meeting by chance with the victim's mother. "What the Wind Taught Me," a story about a 10-year-old boy whose 15-year-old sister is forced into a primary care role, was based on a similar, nonfictional plight.

To her, the news that nearly half of the city's children required assistance to stave off hunger gave her similar inspiration, and she began writing.

A year after that discussion, there is the genesis of a musical about child hunger -- "Puddin' and the Grumble" -- and a whole lot of support behind it. The Lincoln Community Foundation, one of the organizations that helped release the Vital Signs project, has partnered with the Lied Center for Performing Arts to get the project to the stage.

"We were very excited about it," Lincoln Community Foundation president Barbara Bartle said. "I just thought it was wonderful for the art community to be sitting at that table thinking, 'How can we help?'"

Boesen said the musical will address, from a child's perspective, the nature of hunger, and how being truly, painfully hungry can change you.

The main character, Puddin', is a 10-year-old forced to move in with her grandma. Her grandmother, a former lounge singer, wasn't prepared for it in plenty of ways, and providing for Puddin' becomes a struggle. Throughout the play, the young girl is chased by the Grumble, a physical manifestation of her hunger. One of the ways Puddin' keeps the Grumble at bay is by singing.

"The idea was that the little protagonist of this play, who was challenged by hunger, also could use the arts as a way to combat the hunger," Boesen said.

Boesen is working with scores of people to get the production ready for a Spring 2016 debut at the Johnny Carson Theater. That includes, among others, staff at the Food Bank of Lincoln, a group of American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers composers that includes Nebraskan David von Kampen, and a group of fifth-graders at Clinton Elementary School, who occasionally forgo part of their recess and lunchtime to fill take-home food backpacks for fellow students.

Boesen said she and Wahlqvist first participated in that backpack process, helping to distribute them along with the students. Then, with backing from school staff and parental permission, they organized a series of after-school meetings with six fifth-graders.

"What we learned is, holy cow, these kids should be running the country," Boesen said.

The group, called the Clinton Creative Club, is set to start meeting again on Friday.

The point of the Clinton sessions, Boesen said, isn't to sit in a semicircle and talk for an hour about how hunger makes you feel. During the six weeks of Friday get-togethers, she'd give the fifth-graders some kind of a writing prompt -- like writing a poem about grandma using the phrase "stinky socks," for example -- and let them take it from there.

“I didn’t want to steer their expression,” she said, “It’s such a gift to have a relationship with these children and see the world through their eyes. I don’t do much. I listen and absorb the wisdom of these tiny souls.”

From those sessions, Boesen said, she and Wahlqvist have learned more about how kids Puddin's age talk to each other than they knew from time spent with their own children, who are similar in age to the Clinton students. Instead of saying they're angry, they talk of "flipping tables." And if one student had a bad day, the others asked how they could help.

And she said it seems like every time she's been to Clinton, she's seen an orange roll out of a backpack, across the floor.

"Everyone immediately stops to see who the owner is," Boesen said.

She described the students' contribution to the musical about hunger in cooking terms. They're “letting that season the project,” Boesen said.

And she's hoping that the finished product will be a way to address that 44 percent number from the Vital Signs report and change it.

"Awareness is wonderful," Boesen said. "Theater is a call to action. What I would hope is it would give anyone who experiences it the opportunity to see life from varying perspectives. Ultimately, that’s the way we change the world.”