



Certainly bucking tradition and conventional wisdom comes naturally to Jeff Gordon.

After all, the four-time NASCAR Cup champion brokered new ground as a young driver coming into the sport and continues to cast aside marks that have stood for years. He's matching legends and Hall of Famers year to year.

But this is different.

Last season, Gordon once more entered uncharted territory when he joined ranks with a cause-driven primary sponsorship. The AARP's Drive to End Hunger campaign adorned Gordon's car for the first time — but it's done much more than that.

In embracing the cause completely, Gordon has found himself once more backing his words with actions as he has worked over the course of 2011 and this season to raise awareness for hunger among older Americans.

To listen to Gordon talk about it, he gets as much from his Drive to End Hunger sponsorship as the company does.

Gordon's charitable endeavors are wide-ranging. Through his Jeff Gordon Foundation, he has worked to [fund](#) hospital efforts and traveled to third-world countries, most recently to open a cancer center he funded in Rwanda. This season he has spoken often and eloquently about the impact that raised awareness of these issues and his work with them has on his life.

That has extended to include embracing the Drive to End Hunger cause on a heightened level.

First, he and AARP Foundation president Jo Ann Jenkins have participated in a program whose aim is twofold: Bring awareness of senior hunger to more people and raise [funds](#) to combat the problem. When the sponsorship plan was first announced for the 2011 season, some openly questioned how a non-profit could use this vehicle to raise funds.

Those questions are no longer raised.

Working with Gordon last year, Jenkins says, "we served over 8 million meals across the country and raised over \$16 million to help solve the issue of hunger in this country." The program has also given grants to groups that are developing what they hope are long-term solutions to resolving the hunger issue.

For his part, Gordon has taken his support to a personal level. Long known as a polished spokesperson and a sponsor's dream, he has raised the bar. And while he is still involved with — and speaks well of — other companies, it's clear this has a personal touch for Gordon.

“This program has just been phenomenal and for me to be a part of it,” he says. “. . . I’ve learned so much about NASCAR and sponsorship, the race fans and how this community loves to give back to a great cause so I’m very proud to be able to represent that every weekend that we’re at the track or wherever they may travel.”

This endeavor tends to lend a little perspective to one’s efforts. Gordon knows that. This year, even when he has dealt with struggles on the track, Gordon found comfort in the work with his sponsor. Gordon has yet to win this season and sits 17th in the points standings.

Yet, he finds it easy to concentrate on the off-track impact of his team.

“I am very proud of the efforts and so impressed with how things have been going off the track with Drive to End Hunger,” he said in late May. “I’m just so proud to represent them and be associated with them.”

Conversely, he also has found the highlights carrying more weight.

“In this case, it’s even better when you do well on the track because it directly impacts what this program is all about away from the racetrack,” he says. “That only puts more pressure on me to step it up. . . . I feel like life is about balance, just like a fast race car is about balance. You can win all the races and all the championships that there are, but if you’re not doing what I feel like you’re called upon as a citizen, as a human, to balance out and it could be spending time with your family, it could be spending time with your friends, giving back to your local community, giving back to a great cause, volunteering, giving that effort — I think you have to balance that out with many things across the board to not only make you a better person, but that helps me be a better race car driver as well.

“So this program, as well as what I do with the Jeff Gordon Children’s Foundation, it humbles me, but it definitely keeps me balanced and able to keep a smile on my face when things don’t go well.”



Jeff Gordon drives the No. 24 Drive to End Hunger Chevy. (Photo: Getty Images)

For Gordon, it seems the big picture has perhaps shifted in recent years.

His work with the program includes more than just being a spokesman, though he does that exceptionally well. Gordon’s hands-on approach has seen him entering new avenues — and gaining a new appreciation for what this issue truly means.

He’s spoken with fans at tracks, many of whom have a personal story of someone they know or know of who has dealt with the issue.

And he's seen firsthand what it takes to combat hunger among older Americans.

"The most impressive thing that I've been a part of is going and visiting food banks and seeing how much effort goes into collecting the food, sorting the food and then distributing the food. . . . The volunteering that goes on, not just going out and trying to figure out where to get the food from, but — every can of food that comes in, it has a dent in it or something, they have to sort through and figure out which one is going to go into which package and then how it's going to be distributed and it's so, so impressive the effort," he said.

"It shined a whole new light to me on this whole issue and especially the effort that is put into each food bank. That's pretty much who we deal with in every community, is finding the food bank. And how efficient they are. What they can do with one dollar goes so, so far. So that really inspired me and it got me really fired up about this cause and how we can truly make a difference and it's so many levels, from volunteering, fundraising, awareness. Last year, it was an eye-opening experience for me."

Perhaps for the fans he met when working with food banks or packing up meals, as well.

Gordon admits he might have met some individuals who have become NASCAR fans through the work his group and sponsor are doing with the program. Jenkins quickly points out she knows a source of multiple new NASCAR fans.

"AARP has 37 million members who may not have been NASCAR fans last year, but they certainly are now," she says. "They certainly know a lot about Jeff Gordon, and even around the whole AARP family I am just amazed at how many people we run into who say now they are sitting and they're watching the race or they're going to the race and it's really, I think, we're trying to add a different kind of fuel injection into the conversation, really getting more people from not only the AARP but the older community and their families involved in the sport. And they love Jeff."

And, it seems, Gordon's life has been enriched by the experience.

"We're making a difference and it puts a smile on my face," he said.