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Second Harvest Food Bank, church partner to feed community



Produce given out at a Thursday Food Bank pantry. (Tara Fatemi Walker/Special to the Sentinel)

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Looking at the long line of people awaiting food on a Thursday at Santa Cruz Bible Church, it's impressive that Second Harvest Food Bank and the church are feeding this many families. The actual number is even higher. Everyone in line will go through the farmers market-style food distribution and select groceries their family needs. Lots more get fed through a ripple effect that takes place after the official 12-1 p.m. distribution ends. Don't underestimate the power of what community organizations can accomplish with committed volunteers.

The Thursday pantry volunteer co-directors are Dan Moher, Lois Smith and Miguel Aznar. For years, the pantry was at Inner Light Ministry. In early 2022, they discovered the pantry had to close or relocate by the end of March. Moher, Smith and Aznar were determined to find a new location.

Aznar reached out to Santa Cruz Bible Church. The church's Thursday pantry needed more volunteers, so they were invited to take over the Thursday program, where they would be autonomous but operate under the Santa Cruz Bible Church umbrella.

Even with the logistics of moving freezers and setting up the system, the pantry only paused for two weeks. "Second Harvest Food Bank sent a truck to help us move – which I felt was above and beyond their responsibilities and much appreciated," says Moher.

"At (Inner Light Ministry), they pioneered a model of distribution," says Scott Newman, a Santa Cruz Bible Church pastor. "It gives folks dignity, and they can take what they need and leave what they don't. The bags we give out Tuesday are great too; people are very grateful." On Tuesdays, volunteer Johanna Luck – who oversees the church's food programs – manages the pantry. From 10 a.m. to noon, people receive two pre-filled bags of groceries. "This is done differently than Thursday's format, but just as successful," says Luck. Asked why she volunteers, Luck replies, "No one should go hungry."

The partnership is a perfect fit. "We've been distributing food for a while, but since COVID-19 the need has skyrocketed," says Newman. "The fact this team came over and were such a well-oiled machine, it's enabled us to get more folks fed."

Each core Thursday pantry team member has different responsibilities. Moher provides behind-the-scenes support. He acts as main liaison with The Food Bank staff (including ordering food) and oversees the pantry.

"What inspires me is knowing we are making a positive difference in people's lives," says Moher. Starting as team lead just before the pandemic, he changed the weekly pantry from a mostly produce-only pantry (with staples added once per month) to one that includes everything The Food Bank offers.

Anticipating growth when COVID-19 hit, Moher realized the system should be ramped up to get more folks through. He added shopping carts and a double-line system (opposite sides of each table contain the same food), which moved people through twice as fast. Santa Cruz Bible Church's Thursday pantry is now the county's largest evangelical food pantry that Second Harvest partners with. "I am proud to have helped shape this system so our food insecure get the food they need and the dignity they deserve while getting it," says Moher.

Co-director Lois Smith has volunteered for 18 years. Every Thursday, she shows up between 8-8:30 a.m. (and stays till 2 or 3) and lays out an array of food plus coffee and tea to ensure everyone has

breakfast. She buys supplies with her own money. "It's how I was brought up – there's always room for one more, you always want to share." Sometimes others will bring things to supplement her offerings or contribute money to the cause, but she does not expect or ask for this.

Renee Waldron, who has been a volunteer and a food recipient for two years, helps Smith. "It's important to give back." Her parents instilled this in her. She started volunteering as a child, at church. Waldron makes coffee and assists Smith with breakfast, ensures there are enough grocery bags available for recipients, and fills in for Smith if she has to miss a week.

Smith's official role: having guests complete forms giving demographic information (one of many examples that display the directors' respectful natures: food distribution recipients are referred to as guests). Her unofficial role? "I make sure everyone feels welcome and loved." Smith and Moher also create reports for The Food Bank, which help identify where the greatest needs are in our community.

Co-director Miguel Aznar originally came to the pantry for food assistance. His purview is the several tables of groceries: setting up and then managing these during the distribution. The Food Bank truck arrives Thursday morning with thousands of pounds of food that the driver unloads onto pallets; Aznar determines where each pallet needs to be placed. "Then I 'seed' the tables with a sample of each food I want there," says Aznar, "so volunteers can finish unloading. I determine how many of each item that each family can have. Next, I assign volunteers to maintain tables during our distribution."

Aznar designed a system so heavier items are toward the beginning of the line. This way, people put canned goods and sturdy produce at the bottom of bags. Delicate items like bread and softer produce are at later tables. "I like the creativity of figuring out how to stage dozens of different items so they fit, and guests can load bags without crushing anything," he says. "I enjoy enabling volunteers to express creativity. I remind our volunteers, if you see a better way to do something, let's make it so." He enjoys giving agency to volunteers so "they don't just work, but also create. I want our pantry to be a space where volunteers can express love."

Aznar stays busy with Thursday's pantry and helping care for his 94-year-old father, who lives nearby. He also leads judging for the Santa Cruz County Science & Engineering Fair.

Once set-up is complete, there is a tradition. Volunteers gather in a circle. Announcements are made, new volunteers are welcomed. At a recent circle, Moher expressed gratitude to the volunteers. "We are getting a ton of food to the community. We're taking care of the food insecure, the homeless, taking care of people that fall through the cracks. Thank you for being here." After announcements, guests start "shopping" – the term they use for going through the line.

The pantry stops around 1 p.m. If she is given leftover items afterward, volunteer Waldron shares them with neighbors at her mobile home park — including one who has adult kids plus several grandkids.

Ellen (name changed for confidentiality) has volunteered for four years and only skips coming for emergencies. “This work is a priority to me.” On a recent Thursday, she had undergone a six-hour chemo treatment the day before, but still showed up. “It’s not just the important work we do to serve others, it’s also the community we’ve created among volunteers — a wonderful group of like-minded people.”

Volunteer Lisa Holcombe helps set up tables and hand out food. Afterward, she receives leftover canned food and produce and brings these to Little Free Pantries (volunteer-run cupboards with food and sundries where people in need can take items).

Holcombe drives around for 2-3 hours daily, a total of 10-15 hours throughout the week, and fills little pantries across Santa Cruz and Capitola. When she returns the next day, 99% of the time the pantry is empty, as people who had been hungry immediately took the food. “I’ve had people tell me they don’t eat unless there is food in these pantries,” says Holcombe.

She also gives some leftover food to a friend who drives to two little pantries in Soquel and one in Corralitos. Countless individuals and families benefit.