

EVERYDAY HEROES

Everyday Heroes: Jennifer Barnes



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By Laura Berrios, For the AJC
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Solidarity Sandy Springs

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When the pandemic closed schools and businesses in 2020, Sandy Springs resident Jennifer Barnes had one concern: what would happen to the families and kids she had been helping? They needed extra food during normal times; what would they do now?

Barnes turned to her neighbors to join her in providing staples and other food items so a few families could get through the shutdown.

Their efforts became [Solidarity Sandy Springs](#), a nonprofit that has since become indispensable to the community. Hundreds of families regularly shop at the free grocery store set up at Sandy Springs First United Methodist Church.



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Credit: Phil Skinner

The pandemic exposed an underlying hunger in the community that no one knew was so great, and now more people are burdened as housing rents and grocery prices keep increasing, said Barnes, 57, a long-time Realtor, married with a teenage son.

“It started off as an answer for the crisis during the pandemic, but we’ve continued to serve people and inflation has changed the dynamics and changed the demographics,” Barnes said.

“We’re a safety net for people. They don’t have to decide if they’re going to feed their family or pay their rent,” she added.

The grocery store, staffed by volunteers, is open from 9 a.m. to noon Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. In addition to food donations from supermarkets and individuals, financial donations go to purchase \$30,000 worth of produce, staples, meat, and milk each month.

More than 550 families -- each with an average of five to seven people -- shop there monthly. Since opening, Solidarity has provided for around 51,000 shoppers, with 40% being children.

While food makes the initial connection, Solidarity volunteers also creates community by hosting events in underserved neighborhoods.

For example, the upcoming holiday market gives children an opportunity to shop for their parents. Barnes went donors and to rummage through their gift drawers to stock the shelves. Last year, 350 children went shopping, and a host of volunteers made it even more special with gift wrapping.

Solidarity has had no shortage of volunteers. More than 4,700 people have helped since its inception. Barnes says people want to do good, “and if you just tell them how to do it and give them the vehicle to do it, it’s life-changing.”

Many volunteers are youth from scout troops, service leagues, and schools. The Solidarity team puts great effort into the volunteer experience so the nonprofit can support a new generation happy to give back to their community.

Solidarity’s most pressing need is for a permanent location in Sandy Springs. The grocery store has moved at least a half dozen times and is constantly setting up and taking down makeshift operations. There is no storage or event space for the big projects Barnes would like to pull off.

She envisions having operations inside a community center that could house other nonprofits, civic groups, seniors, and youth organizations.

“There are so many opportunities to do something if we just had the space to do it,” Barnes said.

As it is, Solidarity attempts at least one big event every month. For example, during October, donors gave their used Halloween costumes so kids could dress up for trick-or-treating or attend the Solidarity-sponsored trunk-or-treat cookout with their families.

In November, residents signed up to provide presents for “Adopt-a-Kid for Christmas.” Last year, 1,718 children participated. Solidarity volunteers also staff a free Santa’s workshop, so cost is not an obstacle for families looking to make holiday memories.

Solidarity used to have a sign that read: “Our goal is to put ourselves out of business,” said Barnes, thinking back at the irony of this compared with the urgency of meeting growing needs in Sandy Springs.

“I think we’re here for a minute,” she added.

HOW TO HELP

Solidarity Sandy Springs, 86 Mt. Vernon Hwy NW, Sandy Springs, GA 30328

Donations accepted: 9 a.m.-noon, Mondays through Saturdays

To volunteer or donate go to <https://solidaritysandysprings.org/>

Explore Meet more Everyday Heroes from the AJC and our news partners

WE’RE STRONGER TOGETHER: A SPECIAL PROJECT

This place we call home is filled with ordinary people who accomplish extraordinary feats. Their selfless acts make this region so special – and they bring out the best in all of us. With the holidays upon us, we wanted to share their inspiring stories, celebrate their accomplishments, and offer ways that you can help.

Just as the 55 people we’re profiling can’t do it alone, nor can we. That’s why we worked closely with our partners to bring you this collection of uplifting stories.

We hope they leave you feeling inspired and ready to tackle the busy new year that lies ahead. We hope they make you feel more connected to your community or to your neighbors.

And maybe, just maybe, they will motivate you to come up with your own small way to make a big difference in the lives of others.