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Popup pantry in Prado

Solidarity Sandy Springs feeding the masses hit by COVID-19

By Everett Catts
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Lourde Mezia was one of the first five to 10 individuals in line to pick up items at Solidarity Sandy Springs, a popup food pantry at Under the Cork Tree restaurant in The Prado shopping center.

Mezia, who lost her job due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, waited six hours for the chance to shop for free food and other things there, she said through a translator.

"It's very scary; too much panic," she said of the outbreak, adding she gave "a million thanks" for the volunteers who organized the food pantry. "I'm very really thankful for this opportunity for giving out food and for God. Bless Him. (The volunteers) are really great people with great hearts."

Alexander Larumbe was one of the first 10 residents in line and waited four hours to get food.

"Both my parents lost their jobs," he said.

When asked where his family would be without the food pantry, Larumbe said, "We would be hungry by now."

Larumbe and Mezia were two of an anticipated 150 residents who came to the food pantry April 21. It was started as a collaboration between The Barnes Young Team at Keller Williams Realty (led by Jennifer Barnes) and Every Kids Camp, a group formed to send un-



Staff - Everett Catts

Above: Residents wait to enter the Solidarity Sandy Springs food pantry at Under the Cork Tree restaurant in The Prado shopping center. **Below:** From left, a volunteer helps a customer shop for items at Solidarity Sandy Springs.



derprivileged children to summer camp each year.

The food pantry began March 27 and is focused on serving the fami-

lies of children enrolled at the Sandy Springs schools with a high percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Entering April 21, it

had served 1,355 shoppers (averaging 150 a day), who each represent a family, Barnes said. She is leading the effort with Erin Olivier and Sonia Simon.

On the first day the food pantry served about 60 families, but 30 did not get food because it ran out.

"We cried," Barnes said. "It was a bad day, but you know what, we kind of got ourselves back together. We put the word back out and we Facebooked everybody we knew and called everybody we knew and we all went shopping. We served 105 families the next day, and everyone in line got fed. ...

"It sort of took on a life of its own from there. We had no idea it would turn into 150 families."

Since then the food pantry has

SEE PANTRY, A2

PANTRY

From A1

been operating on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Under the Cork Tree had been completely closed since March 16. Co-owner Jason Sheetz said he was happy to just give the food pantry's organizers a key since they're longtime customers at that restaurant and his other Sandy Springs one, Hammocks Trading Co.

"It's just an awesome opportunity for everyone to come together," he said. "... Who would have thought eight weeks ago that we would be here?"

The food pantry serves as a grocery store, with each shopper getting two bags. It includes cereal, fruits, vegetables, pasta, pasta sauce and snacks, plus baby food, hygiene items, diapers, formula and books. It started thanks to \$5,000 in seed money from donor Glen Evans, who has since added another \$5,000.

Under the Cork Tree and other restaurants, such as City Bagel and Café, Nothing Bundt Cakes and Macaron Queen, have donated food, and Peachtree Presbyterian Church's LaAmistad after-school program, Sandy Springs United Methodist Church and the Community Assistance Center also gave food or other items.

During Fulton County Schools' spring break (April 6 through 10), more than 1,000 children who had been getting food from the district were served at

a time when those meals had been suspended. Under the Cork Tree, Thos. O'Reilly's Public House (formerly Meehan's), a Moe's location in Buckhead and the Chick-fil-A at Northridge Road each donated food.

The pantry also has been bolstered by individuals giving food, items or money. Barnes said she has volunteers who buy food with the monetary donations they receive. She added it costs \$1,200 to \$1,500 per day to fully stock the pantry and it plans to stay open through the end of the school year in May.

Dominic Gade, who was laid off from his job as a server at O'Reilly's, started volunteering at the food pantry two weeks after it opened.

"I'd never volunteered before, so this is a whole new world for me. It's a great feeling to be able to give back to the community," he said, adding he was shocked at how long the line was there on his first day.

Gade said the residents shopping there have been appreciative of the volunteers running the pantry.

"One of the first days I was here, one of these people, on the way out, thanked all of us," he said. "I guess that's when it hit me. These people are grateful for what we're doing, and it is making an impact. So just seeing those sorts of small interactions, small thank-yous makes all this worth it."

For more information or to make a donation, visit www.solidaritysandyssprings.com.

INSIDE

- ◆ CLASSIFIEDS: A5
- ◆ CRIME: A3
- ◆ OBITUARIES: A2
- ◆ OPINION: A4