

Photo by The Cork Brothers



# Embracing the Joy of Giving Back

**In a time of crisis, Jennifer Barnes '87 supports her community by providing neighbors in need with food for their bodies and souls.**

By Adrienne S. Harris

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Jennifer Barnes '87 was deeply concerned about the impact on her Latinx neighbors in Sandy Springs, Georgia. Eighty percent of them were hourly workers who had suddenly gotten laid off from their jobs and had no support system to fall back on.

So, in March 2020, Barnes joined forces with two friends to launch Solidarity Sandy Springs, a food pantry to help families in need in their community.

"In the beginning, it was basically an emergency," says Barnes, who leads the Barnes Young Team for Keller Williams Realty in metropolitan Atlanta. "We thought we were going to feed 10 families for two weeks because surely the pandemic would be over by then."

Twenty months later, Solidarity Sandy Springs has evolved from a pop-up food pantry into a permanent entity serving the community. So far, the nonprofit has helped more than 32,000 families, mostly in neighborhoods where schools have a high percentage of students enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs.

"We didn't have any idea it was going to be anything like it has been," Barnes says. "This was probably a need all along, but we didn't know it until a crisis hit."

Solidarity Sandy Springs, whose tagline is "Neighbors Helping Neighbors," attracts support from a broad base of constituents. Local restaurants and warehouses have donated space for the organization's operations. Individuals, civic and religious groups, and businesses donate canned goods or money to buy staples, such as rice, beans, corn flour, sugar and spices, as well as fresh produce.

Unlike other food pantries, Solidarity Sandy Springs is set up like a market, with food displayed on tables covered with red-and-white gingham tablecloths. The



current location in the Parkside Shops shopping center is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings, and customers can fill up multiple grocery bags with pantry goods, fruits and vegetables, and household and personal care items of their choice.

“When you’re in crisis, you don’t have a whole lot of choices,” Barnes says. “There is a level of dignity that goes with being able to choose what to feed your family, especially for people from a community that is so family- and food-centered.”

In addition to providing food for the body, Solidarity Sandy Springs provides food for the soul through monthly community events, including celebrations for Mother’s Day, the Fourth of July, Halloween and Hispanic Heritage month. Last December, the organization hosted a Secret Santa project and collected gifts for 843 children—more than double the number they had hoped to serve.

“We had packaged everything in these big, beautiful, red plastic bags, and as I stood in the sea of those red bags, I knew the feeling in my heart at that moment was probably as good as it gets,” she says. “It was the feeling of knowing that we were spreading joy to kids and families.”

The “we” Barnes refers to includes one paid staff person, three full-time volunteers and 75 regular part-time volunteers. Since the food pantry opened, more than 1,900 people, including many from the community being served, have pitched in at various times to help collect and sort food, organize events and serve customers. The youngest volunteer is five years old and the oldest is 91.

“Our volunteers are attracted to being a part of something that’s bigger than themselves—no matter what their language or the color of their skin,” Barnes says. “I laugh at all these politicians talking about diversity and inclusivity. They just need to come to Solidarity Sandy Springs where we live it.”

Barnes first embraced the joy of giving back while growing up in Riceville, Tennessee (population 600), where her entire family was involved in community service. Aside from the fact that coming to Agnes Scott College gave her a chance to live in the “big city,” Barnes was attracted to the college because it upholds the beliefs and principles that are important to her.

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“When I visited Agnes Scott during senior weekend and spent the night in Inman [Hall], I knew it was the place for me,” says Barnes, who majored in economics and sociology. “Agnes Scott allows you to think deeper, to listen, to ask the right kind of questions. The school itself promotes compassion and kindness, openness and inclusivity, social justice and living a life of service.”

After graduation, Barnes worked in banking for three years. Then she got her real estate license and has been building her career in that industry since 1990.

“In real estate, you’re moving people to different chapters of their lives,” she says. “You get to be a part of their life for a small segment of time. And hopefully, you create a relationship where you’re friends forever.”

Her desire to establish lasting relationships and make a difference in people’s lives also drives Barnes’ work with Solidarity Sandy Springs.

“I’m seriously living my best life wearing a checkered shirt and red hat hanging out with groceries all day,” she says. “And I’m doing it in conjunction with people who have the same servant’s heart and find the same joy in giving back that I do.”



Jennifer Barnes '87 (far right) with early supporters of Solidarity Sandy Springs efforts. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Barnes.



Barnes (left) with volunteers distributing school breakfasts and lunches during virtual school days in Atlanta. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Barnes.

