

Millis Ashram Opens Curbside Food Pantry for All

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By J.D. O'Gara

Seva. The word means "selfless service," and for the spiritual Sikh community, it is an integral part of daily life – a practice of acting selflessly and helping others without any expectation of personal gain. One act of seva is langar, the act of preparing and serving a free community meal, and in that spirit, Sikh Dharma of Massachusetts recently opened a new pick-up food pantry, operating every Saturday from 12-2 p.m. in the drive-through parking lot of Woodside Montessori School at 350 Village Street in Millis.



This chilly, sunny Saturday, volunteers stand ready to place bagged food directly into the trunks of those who need it. From left, Gurumeet Khalsa, Japa Saraswati, and Dharma Khalsa.

"We'd been thinking about doing this for a long time, and in the spring, when Covid came, we decided to start. We hope to serve the larger community, and we're hoping to expand this, to go out into the community to feed people," says Dr. Manjit Kaur Khalsa, EdD, President of Guru Ram Das Ashram and Gurdwara, the New England regional center for Sikh Dharma and Kundalini Yoga, in Millis, Mass.

Members of this community, about 22 of whom live at the Ashram and 1,000 who come weekly (although the center is currently closed due to the pandemic), raised money to upgrade the Ashram's kitchen to a commercial grade space. They plan to use "Guru Nanak's Community Kitchen," named for

the 15th century founder of the Sikh religion, to prepare meals for neighbors in need. The food pantry is a part of that.

"It's really needed right now, considering the state of everything going on," says Edwin Meglio, food pantry coordinator. Meglio, who has come to the center for years for yoga and meditation, has used his experience in the national food industry to get the pantry up and running.

"We got together and learned the rules and regulations of distributing food to people," says Meglio, who has received generous donations of non-perishable foods and toiletries from Trader Joes, among others. "We want to make sure we're being as careful as possible, as half the people (who live) at the Ashram are 50 and over and at higher risk (for Covid). Our team is extremely careful to be vigilant that we do everything exactly according to the CDC and state guidelines."

Anyone from Massachusetts is welcome "We're trying to help as many people as possible," says Meglio, who has reached out to the Franklin Senior Center to work on getting food delivered to local homebound seniors. "Sometimes people who need the food don't have the means to come and get it," he says.

Volunteers place bags directly into recipients' vehicles. Shown, Edwin Meglio and Japa Saraswati.



Since the Ashram is a vegetarian community, the foods distributed are vegetarian and as natural as possible, with most in bpa-free packaging. "We offer non-perishable foods that are cleaned and bagged up, stapled and sealed, along with personal hygiene items that are separate from the food," says Meglio, adding, "We're not looking to influence anyone religiously or spiritually, and there's no obligation to come to a service or anything like that."

Volunteers ready bags filled with meat-free, non-perishable food, along with bags of toiletries, for distribution. Rear: Dr. Khalsa, Front, from left: Siri Sevak and Edwin Meglio, Food Pantry Coordinator.

Down the road, Dr. Khalsa envisions a community garden on the being added to the mix.

"We have land we hope to farm, and we'll educate people on how to grow their own vegetables," she says.

In the future, Meglio plans to conduct food drives for the food relief program. Right now, Guru Nanak's Community Kitchen is accepting monetary donations at its website, www.Nanakskitchen.org, and those interested in volunteering can contact Edwin at edwin@nanakskitchen.org.

