

'Be the One'

phrase motivates Freehold Area Open Door director in her quest to help those in need

BY REBECCA HERSH

With dramatically rising costs for gas, food, housing, and medical care - exacerbated by job insecurity and ongoing pandemic stressors - New Jerseyans are feeling squeezed from all sides.

But there is a "door" on Throckmorton Street in Freehold that is always open and embraces the word "welcome" on its mat with compassion and fierce commitment. Freehold Area Open Door, a non-profit interfaith agency, provides survival aid to

The best I can do is to be here right now, not worry about the whole picture, and work on whatever immediate problems I can help people with today. And now I have a sign on my wall that says 'Be the one' in my office. It is what motivates me and keeps me going in this work," she said.

For the last 35 years, Freehold Area Open



anyone who walks over its threshold - food, emergency funding for housing and utilities, advocacy, mentoring, and scholarships, and has been doing so consistently since 1988.

Ms. GERALYN FRAGGETTA-DRURY, who took over as the organization's director four years ago, tells her staff to "be the one" to make a difference today and help people in whatever immediate way possible.

"I came to the nonprofit world from Wall Street, because I realized how much I wanted to help people. When I first started at Freehold Area Open Door, I would come home so sad because I felt overwhelmed by the fact that I couldn't help everyone and couldn't fix everything. But then I had a revelation: that I couldn't do it all at once. And that's when I coined the phrase, 'Be the one.'

Door has been a place where anyone can go for help, no questions asked. What began as mostly food distribution has expanded into a multifaceted aid organization that provides a wide range of services to the public.

The Food Pantry distributes non-perishable food providing three-to-five days' worth of meals per person/per household once per month. Bread and produce are distributed daily.

The After School Program, which provides homework assistance for children in Freehold Borough schools in third, fourth, and fifth grade who are struggling with schoolwork.

The Client Advocacy Program a social please see **PANTRY, page 10**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FREEHOLD AREA OPEN DOOR FOOD PANTRY

RIGHT: Volunteers stocking donations. LEFT: FoodstockNJ recently blessed the Freehold Area Open Door Food Pantry with a major donation that will allow them to complete renovations and restock the pantry.

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COVER PHOTO BY JAMIE GIAMBRONE
The Juice House two face bowl with coconut flakes.

worker working with individuals to prevent evictions, foreclosures and utility shut-offs. The social worker acts as a social safety resource and is able to refer to other governmental and not for profit agencies and organizations for services that Open Door doesn't provide.

The Scholarship Fund is for children who participate in the

After School Program and go on to graduate from Freehold Regional High School. The funds help paying for college or vocational school.

A key characteristic of the organization has been its flexibility - its ability to adapt to the changing needs - of the community.

"When Open Door started, the trustees quickly realized that the most pressing need in the community was food," Fraggetta-Drury said. "Initially, the organization tried to do everything - clothing, housewares, money, food. But we quickly learned that food was the most pressing need we could help with."

But in the years that followed, Open Door slowly opened wider and wider as an interfaith organization, providing more services and partnering with other area social service organizations to maximize the amount of assistance it provides. For example, Open Door has partnered with Foodstock, a Freehold-based grassroots organization started 12 years ago. The organizations work together on community outreach and direct food pantry help. An annual Foodstock music festival features not only great music, but a way to collect food - the entrance fee is a food donation.

And four years ago when Fraggetta-Drury left Wall Street for a career on Throckmorton Street, the organization entered an era of even faster transformational change. The programs expanded to nearly unrecognizable proportions compared to its minimalist beginnings.

"We now are a fully government authorized food pantry. We get food from the government and also can buy food at a discount, enabling us to be open to distribute food for anyone in New Jersey - we say 'No' to no one," she said.

The growth in the food program is obvious in the data. For example, in June 2019, Open Door provided life-sustaining food help to 556 families/households. By June 2020, the number grew to 1,593 households.

The pandemic and high unemployment continues to produce a continued great demand for food. On Thanksgiving over 500 families get a complete Thanksgiving dinner.

The pandemic, unemployment, and

inflation have all increased demand for food assistance, Fraggetta-Drury said.

"The pandemic has also been a major factor in the demand for help with rent and mortgages, as well as utility payments, so Open Door has stepped



up our work in these areas. The organization is also seeing a considerable increase in demand for help with paying for expensive prescription medications, including medications for cancer patients and diabetics," she said.

"Another really exciting thing we've been doing recently is that we teamed up with Gramercy Brass Orchestra and have been doing a free arts program for kids in our area. Working with the Arts Center of Freehold, we put together a spring and summer camp, which is a huge deal for us. It's a way for us to bring top-notch instructional arts professionals from places like New York City and provide arts education to kids who wouldn't have that opportunity otherwise."

This year's summer camp - a theater-themed arts camp - will run from August 15-19, with a special performance by the kids on the final day.

The availability of Open Door's aid is no good if people don't know about it, noted Fraggetta-Drury.

As such, Open Door has made huge efforts to get the word out through a variety of community outreach methods. The organization has a huge social media and web presence and shows up at all the local events.

"We now constantly update our list of items we'd like to see donated, and post the lists on the website and Facebook page," Fraggetta-Drury said. "This has dramatically

Community

helped with getting donations of things we actually need. People are very responsive.

"All I know is that those who give of their time and resources to this cause benefit as much as those who receive."

The welcoming hearth at Open Door can be accessed at faopendoor.org or on Facebook at facebook.com/FreeholdAreaOD/ ■

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FREEHOLD AREA
OPEN DOOR FOOD PANTRY

RIGHT: Rutgers Master Gardeners stopped by recently with locally grown greens and veggies from their "Plant a Row for the Hungry Garden." LEFT: Roseanne brought sunshine to our delivery clients with colorful Spring baskets. BOTTOM: Janet and Mark recently jogged over with a very generous donation.