

TOAST OF THE TOWN

Stocking the shelves: Caring students boost food pantry

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After Freehold Area Open Door, a local food pantry, publicized the lack of donations of money and goods in recent months, the public came through.

"The response is really amazing," said Jeanne Yaecker, Open Door's executive director. "I know this is a very generous community. When you need them to respond, they do. And, for that, we're extremely grateful."

In one week earlier this month, more than \$4,000 was donated. Also, food donations have come in.

Among those leading the charge to replenish Open Door's shelves were sixth- and seventh-graders at Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County in Marlboro.

"I told the kids about the issue," said Marcy Kay, vice principal. "This is our chance, we can do something to help."

The school had held food drives before and its students had helped out at Open Door in the past, Kay said. This time, all of the approximately 35 sixth- and seventh-graders participated, collecting enough food to fill a half-dozen boxes for Open Door.

"It was one of the most amazing things I've ever done," said Brittany Noah, 12, a seventh-grader from Marlboro. "We could make a difference in the universe."

This year, Open Door has been serving about 640 to 825 individuals a month, a jump of about 100 to 130 from last year, in Freehold and Freehold Township, Colts Neck, Marlboro and Millstone Township. Of these clients, about 40 percent are the "working poor," 24 percent are unemployed, 22 percent are disabled and 15 percent are retired, Yaecker said.

Open Door gives out three to five days' worth of food once a month to clients, normally. But, with a diminished supply, it had been giving out about three days' worth, Yaecker said.

Andrew Goldwasser, 12, a sixth-grader from Marlboro, told his parents he "wanted to help these people — they're defenseless."

"I said, 'Mom, these people



Standing with items collected during a food drive for the Freehold Area Open Door food pantry at Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County in Marlboro are, from left: Brittany Noah, 12; Adi Yarhi, 11, and Andrew Goldwasser, 12. (PHOTO COURTESY OF SOLOMON SCHECHTER DAY SCHOOL)

need our help. They need the food more than we do," Brittany said.

Adi Yarhi, 11, a sixth grader from Ocean Township, went shopping, buying tuna, beans, corn, coffee, chocolate and matzo.

"I was just thinking, people need food," Adi said. "I just wanted to help a lot."

Andrew noted how things happened quickly — Kay's meeting with the students was on a Tuesday and Open Door picked up the food that Friday.

"Some people care about other people," Andrew said.

Jeremy Zullow, 12, a seventh-grader from Marlboro, was familiar with Open Door's needs because he has been volunteering there as part of his bar mitzvah community service project. But Jeremy said he did not realize how quickly Open Door ships out food.

"We're doing a little better," Yaecker said, analyzing how Open Door was progressing a week after its appeal was publicized.

But Yaecker added, "It's going out as fast as it comes in."

Jeremy said the clients he saw at Open Door looked "like everyday normal people."

Naria Aviles, 22, of Freehold has been picking up food at Open Door for three years. Aviles said she works in a fast-food restaurant and has a 1-year-old son.

"I need help," Aviles said, ex-

plaining that she also collects items such as diapers.

"It hit home, these people live within our community," Kay said.

On a recent day, Mark Sakowitz, 40, of Marlboro dropped off donations filling the back of a sport-utility vehicle, collected by Girl Scouts in that township, for Open Door.

"They (the Scouts) just did something real quick," Sakowitz said. "They knew they (the needy) were hurting."

"They're ready to do more," said Sakowitz, speaking of the Scouts. "This is what we could get in a few days."

At Open Door, Yaecker looked at the shelves, heavily stocked compared to a week earlier.

"Look at the nice stuff, sturdy stuff," Yaecker said, noting items such as tuna and beef stew.

With the \$4,000 in donations, Open Door's reserve fund can be replenished. It had been down to about \$30,000, Yaecker said. Normally, the reserve does not go below \$50,000 before being brought up to its full amount of \$60,000 she said.

Open Door operates on an annual budget of \$120,000, which includes the six-month, \$60,000 safety net, she said.

For the Solomon Schechter kids, the effort was a *mitzvah*, or good deed.

"That's what we teach here," Kay said.