

# Coming together in time of crisis

By Leslie Baer Dinkel



Pictured above, Interact Club members (Gabby, Alexa and Danny), are divvying up tortillas. Courtesy photo

## In COVID's wake, Food Pantry meeting unprecedented need

It was something Nia Gerard never imagined she'd see: People who are normally employed and helping others now lining up to receive a free bag of food. One far out.

"They'd run a successful business. They'd always helped others. Their love and grace always been monumental on the island," Gerard recalled. "Now, they need help. I'm grateful when I handed them their groceries, they had tears in their eyes. It's heart-wrenching."

For the past four years, Gerard has run Avalon Community Church's Lord's Pantry to assist low-income families and the homeless. Each Wednesday, the pantry is n

by just five to seven families. In the lean winter months when visitor count drops increases to 10 to 12 families in need, Gerard explained. But in early March, she and threaten to overwhelm the pantry.

"The need was unprecedented. That's when I realized that this emergency was going to be a lasting hardship for many families on the island, and that we were in for a marathon.

Gerard's instincts proved to be right.

With the throngs of visitors who normally begin their pilgrimage to Catalina Island now staying away, times are tough for many islanders, like the family Gerard describes who works in the tourist trade or supports tourism. Unemployment among working islanders has already reached 80 to 90 percent, according to three local institutions.

Jim Lutjohann, president and CEO of the Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce Bureau, described how, as the COVID-19 outbreak spread and travel restrictions were put in place, Avalon — visited by about 75,000 guests each March as a five-year average — morphed into a ghost town.

"We're now seeing only bare-necessities travel, such as residents coming and going for appointments and other essential business," Lutjohann said. "For all intents and purposes, it's down to zero visitors."

Earlier in the year, Gerard had started working with the city to help provide essential services beyond food for the homeless of Avalon. As it dawned on her that reinforcements were most definitely needed, City of Avalon Community Services Director Dan Huncke stepped in if on cue.

"I'd just gotten calls from the Island Company which was closing its restaurants, and the Sea that had a group of 280 cancel," said Huncke. "Between these sources, we had three truckloads of food to distribute."

"The timing was perfect," Gerard exclaimed. "Even with the pallets of corn, beans and staples Vons had been donating to the pantry, we couldn't keep it stocked. The food was off the shelves!"

With his truckloads of food to sort and package, Huncke put out the word for help. In short notice, 15 community volunteers came together. The Catalina Island Medical Center followed safety protocols for the large-scale effort. That day, March 20, the joint Church-C

the Pantry operation was born. In its first mass operation the group handed out 4 groceries to a grateful 250 families. "It was really a tremendous operation," Gera

Recognizing that the threat of COVID-19 was here to stay, at least for some months, Catalina Island charities reached out to see how they could assist. The Catalina Island Foundation offered funding for the food security effort, and also, to pull together an Advisory Group to integrate similar efforts such as Avalon School's Free Lunch Program and the City of Avalon's Wheels.

"Our aim was to mobilize a group that could help support Dan, Nia, and every family in need, and also be prepared to support other community needs as the crisis progresses," said Cliff Hague, Catalina Island Foundation Co-Founder.

The resulting Avalon Food Security Advisory Group includes Avalon Rotary Club President Patsy Hohenstein; Avalon Community Church's Reed Woodward; City of Avalon's Jen M. Catalina Island Foundation Board Members Sue Rikalo and Cliff Hague, and the City of Avalon's Huncke, with additional support from Mike and Linda Rivkin, both cofounders of the Catalina Island Foundation.

Early on, Avalon Lions Club purchased one hundred \$25 gift cards to be used at local businesses that were included in the grocery bags. The Blue Water Group donated 2,000 pounds of produce they shipped over at their cost from their restaurants on the mainland. Cat Beveridge helped to help navigate the maze of wholesale ordering and track down suppliers. Linda Rivkin used her linkages with the Avalon School free-meals program and got the word out. Other neighborhood coordinators to pick up food and take it to those in need. A "Pay-it-forward" program was developed to encourage volunteering post-COVID, and added to the food bags. The inclusion of perishables like milk and eggs to the food bags was hatched, and Steve Hoefs volunteered to help with wholesale order processing and to use the "M" for cold storage.

For ongoing distributions, other organizations joined in to help, including the Avalon High School teens from the Rotary Interact Club, and sponsored youth from the SCIF Scholars Program. Weekly preparation takes up to 15 volunteers, with the Lion's Club consistently filling those positions, Huncke said. The volunteers gather on Tuesdays at the Teen Center for bulk donations, and prepare bags of groceries to distribute to struggling families on Wednesdays, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Center.

Since not everyone can come pick up food, Huncke is among those who check on families to make sure they get food. One woman who is homebound left a message for Huncke that drove home the importance and impact of the various food security programs at the

moment for the Island community, and arguably, for the world.

"She was overwhelmed and in tears," he described. "The help meant the world to

Huncke and Gerard have been exceedingly grateful for the support. "There are so many pieces," Huncke describes of the operation that is now producing supplemental groceries for 100 to 125 families each week, representing 300 to 400 individuals—close to 10 percent of the Island's year-round population.

"How everyone has stepped in to help has been a Godsend," added Gerard. "I don't know else we could be doing this. The outpouring of support has been nothing short of

Of course, worthy, large-scale efforts are made possible through the generosity of individuals, in-kind, and cash funding. The food security operation is costing an estimated \$10,000 per week, Huncke said. At this writing, lead gifts have been made from the Catalina Foundation, Blanny Hagenah, the Catalina Yacht Club, the Tuna Club Foundation, Los Angeles/Janice Hahn, and the Avalon Rotary Foundation.

Major gifts have also been received from Gary Johnson, the Rusack Family, Susar Lion's Club, and Ralph Larison. Major Gifts-in-Kind have been made by the Hoef's Blue Water Group, Gary Johnson, the Catalina Island Company, Campus by the Sea, Bombard and Vons.

Thanks, too, to "the dozens of other donors who've come forward to support the program," Huncke who reports a total of more than \$40,000 in donations so far. "The outpouring of support from the community has been incredible."

Still, he says, there's a need for additional funding—especially considering the uncertainty that long travel restrictions will stay in place, and when they are lifted, how long it will take for visitors to feel safe enough to venture back to the Island.

"We aren't sure how quickly our tourism industry will bounce back, but we think it will and that many people won't be back to work right away," Huncke said. He and the Board anticipate needing to continue the food relief program for at least the next several months, Huncke said, adding, "we will adjust as need dictates."

Considering what's already been raised and spent, the fundraising goal for the bailout effort is an additional \$40,000, Huncke reported. "If you can afford \$10 or \$10,000 contribution will make a difference and will be appreciated."

"The need is there now, and some level of need will continue until this situation n  
Huncke concluded. "Thanks to the generosity of the Avalon community and also,  
in Los Angeles County, we'll be ready."

A contribution to help fund the food security operation can be made at cityofavala  
navigating through the City's "COVID-19" portal to the "Donate" button, or a tax-  
donation can be made through avaloncommunitychurch.org, specifying the type a  
"Food Pantry."

