

Feeding the hungry

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Mitch Heinz carries his faith in a paper bag.

Sometimes he has as many as 60 to 70 bags full of faith -- and sandwiches.

For more than a year, Heinz has arrived on Thursdays at noon at the West Augustine area of Nassau and Cathedral streets to distribute lunch to local residents. It is an area riddled with poverty and mostly unemployed residents who spend much of their time at home, visiting neighbors or playing cards and other games at their unpaved roadside.

Dubbed the "Sandwich Mission," neighbors have come to expect and accept Heinz and his helpers not only on Thursdays, but now also on Wednesdays.

The Sandwich Mission is a non-denominational Christian ministry organization dedicated to "reaching out and loving our neighbors by providing them with physical and spiritual nourishment." Although it is not an official function of the Good News Presbyterian Church on Wildwood Drive, many of those participating are members of Good News. Some are part of the church's youth group and include students from nearby Flagler College.

The brown bags, assembled and packed by a number of local individuals and organizations, include a sandwich, drink, crackers, dessert and an all-important card with a scripture verse on it. At the Thursday brown bag distribution, neighbors are invited to stay for a community Bible study.

Heinz said the idea for the Sandwich Mission came to him more than a year ago. "I've always liked to help people," the 32-year-old freelance graphic artist said.

He admits that the first time he went to the area with his brown bags, he was afraid he would not be accepted, but discovered that "they were as skeptical of me as I was of the whole idea at that point," Heinz recalls.

"We soon became friends and family. They realized that I and the others who come each week have no hidden agendas -- just to help and love them," the soft-spoken Heinz says.

Fills other needs

In addition to the weekly lunches, the Sandwich Mission also sees to other needs in the community. Flagler students Luke Brodersen, Anna Kroeger, Josh Ariza and Pat Higgins are among the regular visitors. They and others help obtain and distribute clothing.

Some stay and play cards or dominos with the residents while some just engage in friendly talk. Special Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners were also served last year.

West Augustine resident Glenda Richardson says that the mission is a blessing for her neighborhood. "It brings out a lot of neighbors. There's plenty of fellowship now," Richardson says.

And, although some get a brown bag, "they all don't stay for the Bible study and some don't even go to church. But the word of God comes forth anyway," Richardson says. "People can't change without God," she adds.

First anniversary

The one-year anniversary of the Sandwich Mission was celebrated on Feb. 28. Instead of handing out brown bags, however, Heinz set up tables that the Flagler College students decorated with tablecloths and balloons. That day, instead of a variety of sandwiches from a number of sources, "everyone ate the same sandwich," Heinz said, indicative of the unity the Sandwich Mission has brought to the neighborhood. Four 4-foot sub sandwiches, chips, beverages and two large cakes decorated to resemble sandwiches were placed on the tables.

Heinz credits one of his enthusiastic volunteers, Tara Guemon, with the success of the anniversary celebration. "She worked so hard on this event, not only beforehand, but she pretty much single handedly, cut the 16 feet of sandwiches into 100 portions. Tara was able to get the sandwiches, cakes and decorations donated," Heinz said.

As the neighbors, students, church members and Heinz formed a prayer circle before lunch, West Augustine resident Michael Rivers led the prayer. "We are grateful for our friends from this mission," Rivers said as he prayed that each of his neighbors becomes a better person because of it.

Heinz said that because the work of the mission continues to expand, he's thankful for help and contributions from individuals and organizations.

Anyone interested in helping with the food distribution or contributing to the Sandwich Mission may call Heinz at 315-2725. Information is also available at www.sandwichmission.org .

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