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VOLUNTEERS ALICIA'S HOUSE

VOLUNTEERS: Alicia's House

In Alicia's name, bags of grocery staples at food pantry come with a treat

By Alena Scarver

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When needy families receive bags of groceries at Alicia's House food pantry in South Chicago Heights, they can expect a little surprise in each bag: a few pieces of candy.

Run by Stella and Juan Hernandez, the pantry is named for their granddaughter, who died in 2001 at age 4 after she was struck by a falling dresser.

Alicia used to help her grandparents put together bags of food when they volunteered at the food pantry at New Life Family Christian Church in Crete and Alicia would always throw a few pieces of candy into the bags "because she wanted the kids to have what she had," said her grandmother Stella Hernandez, 49.

After Alicia's death, the church asked the Hernandezes to take over the 300-square-foot food pantry, which they renamed in her memory.

They started out feeding about 15 families per week, but that number jumped to 50 as they publicized the pantry at community events and local newspapers.

"We had more families to feed and we were running out of room," said Juan Hernandez, 43.

Juan Hernandez was able to find the pantry's current site, at 17 Paulsen Ave., thanks to his brother Sal. The 3,300-square-foot building was listed at \$138,000, but the man sold it to Juan for \$70,000.

And because they were getting more supplies, the Hernandezes also needed a truck. Thanks to the kindness of a stranger from Indiana, they got a deal on that too.

The woman's husband had recently died and she was selling his Ford F-150 for \$6,500. The



Hernandezes had budgeted \$4,300 but, after Juan drove to Lowell, Ind., to meet the woman, the best he could negotiate was \$5,300.

That's why he was surprised when, soon after he made his first payment on the truck, he received a letter from the woman stating that she knew in her heart that the truck was destined to serve a good purpose. Included in the letter was a check for \$1,000.

Now with the truck and the South Chicago Heights location, Alicia's House -- open from 9 to 11 a.m. every Tuesday -- serves about 50 to 70 families per week from the areas of Crete, Beecher, Steger, Monee, Peotone, University Park and South Chicago Heights.

Janice Braun, 69, has known Juan Hernandez since he was a boy and has been volunteering for three years at Alicia's House. She checks people's identification and finds out how many members are in a family before handing out groceries.

"We have never turned people away or asked people to provide source of income; we believe that if they come, then they need it," she said.

Because Alicia's House is a nonprofit organization that relies solely on donations and fundraisers, the Hernandezes organize and host an annual golf fundraiser that has drawn a number of celebrities, including former Cubs pitcher Milt Pappas.

Pappas, 70, lives in Beecher and met Juan Hernandez about eight years ago. Hernandez had asked him to come to the first fundraising event to sign autographs, and Pappas has attended every one since.

"I think Juan is a super guy who does wonderful work and I'm very proud to help with whatever he needs," said Pappas.

This year's event, held Sept. 12 at the Lincolnshire Country Club in Crete, raised about \$31,000. While continuing with the food pantry, the Hernandezes are looking into a new project to help schoolchildren in the south suburbs.

While watching a special episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," they saw singer Wynonna Judd playing for a charity called Backpack Mission, a program serving poor people in her native state of Kentucky. The charity provides backpacks of nonperishable food to students.

The Hernandezes thought they could do something similar in the Chicago area, so they have reached out to several schools about an after-school program to provide kids a healthy meal when they get home.

"Most kids probably only get one good meal per day, and that's the lunch at school," said Juan Hernandez. "With children having parents who work full time, they are probably cooking for themselves. Unfortunately it's not the healthiest food."

He said the goal is to first identify the families that are in need, then target about 200 school kids per month.

But though the plan is to provide children with healthy meals, they are still going to throw a piece of candy in the bag, in memory of their granddaughter.

"Once people start depending on you for help, you can't just pull out, and we are not into doing anything small," Hernandez said.

To find out how you can help, contact Alicia's House, 17 Paulsen Ave., South Chicago Heights; 708-946-3002; aliciashouse.org/6.html.

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