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A prayer to feed the hungry

by Jon Blau , Chronicle Reporter

Supported by crutches, little of his fortune remains besides the gold chain around his neck, which identifies him as “Prem.”

Once the owner of a trucking business and a clothing store, the 45-year-old man from Cypress Hills has nothing on his feet besides a worn-down pair of sandals and socks, outlining his big toe and where others used to be before diabetes took them away.

He has lost his house. He lost his wife, who divorced him after he had already lost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But today, how he got here, hiding from the sun under a tree near the Morris Brown A.M.E. Church in Jamaica, means little. Prem, along with hundreds of others who stood in line for a plastic bag from the ministry’s food pantry Wednesday, just needs a bite to eat.

“A dollar saved on food is a dollar toward getting my house back — my life back,” he said. “I have lost everything.”

Inside the church basement, food pantry coordinator Sharon Harry surveys her shelves. The stack of canned vegetables that was once soaring toward the ceiling is now sinking to the ground. There are noticeable gaps in supplies, which await transfer into the hands of the hungry outside the gate.

With the country’s continuing economic struggle, the lines at food pantries and soup kitchens across Queens are steadily growing in length, stretching around every corner. The line goes both ways down the 145th Street sidewalk this morning, with senior citizens on one side and the able on the other.

As the bags were passed out, the pantry’s workers had to start wondering. Morris Brown is only a small congregation, with about 35 worshippers on Sundays, feeding about 3,000 people a month. Will the day come when they will have to turn away a starving soul?

“We see new faces here every day,” volunteer James Tolbert said. “Sooner or later, it’s going to get that way.”

Harry says that, on average, she’ll hand out about 350 bags every Wednesday starting at 10 a.m. By noon, she might be fixing a few extra bags with what supplies are left over.

According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger’s annual report released in November, more than 68 percent of agencies did not distribute enough meals to meet demand in 2008. More than 87 percent noted an increase in persons seeking food, and 55 percent said the need increased “greatly.” In response, nearly the same percentage of food programs personally bankrolled efforts to bring in more food. Queens had the greatest amount of agencies without sufficient resources at slightly less than 77 percent.

The situation has only worsened since the report’s release, said Alexandra Yannias, a coordinator at NYCCAH. While stories of laid-off Wall Street brokers in Manhattan stepping in line at soup kitchens is an exception to the rule, Yannias said lower- to middle-income workers — the predominant population segment in Queens — have lost the most during this recession. And while food pantries and soup kitchens are helping ease their suffering for a day or two, these solutions are not sustainable over a person’s lifetime.

“People who were working before at a blue-collar job, just scraping by from paycheck to paycheck, are in need more than ever,” Yannias said.

Two women dressed in matching blue shirts, a 75-year-old grandmother and her 50-year-old daughter, have a weekly schedule where they visit three separate pantries in Jamaica. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, they collect dinner and lunch to last them for several days. The younger woman has three grandchildren and four foster children, all of which have to split a meager ration of beans, canned pork or whatever food they are afforded. They arrive early enough to see line-goers fighting for a spot, the first walking up around 6 a.m., waking up the retired police officer who lives next door.

“Go down the line,” he says, flipping out his badge, “and ask how many of them go to Sunday services. They want the food, but they don’t want the blessing.”

Many of these food programs’ visitors are first-timers or from outside the area, meaning they do not know how to utilize the system. A short woman with an Hispanic accent wonders why they ask for picture identification, as another regular at the pantry tells her immigrants without an I.D. are told they cannot receive a meal. On some occasions, anyone who comes back the following week is told not to return until another week has passed.

But a volunteer notices the woman, offering a smile and saying “She’s alright,” handing her a bag of food to return home with.

Tolbert, 65, continues walking back and forth between the basement and church gate, where more families are waiting. The retired sanitation worker takes a break at around 10:30 a.m., with around 150 bags already handed out. He wipes the sweat off his glasses, recalling how a family with two unemployed parents once came to that gate, asking for food to feed seven children.

They received two bags. The city’s food programs were already underfunded, Yannias said, and now they are being overwhelmed by up to 50 percent increases in demand since November. A lot of that rise can be attributed to the economy. “It stretches an already stretched rubber band,” she said.

Lynn Nunes, a candidate for city council in the 28th District, has visited several soup kitchens to hear horror stories from community leaders, who say the crowds are only growing. Lines like small armies snake around a single sidewalk in both directions. From Jamaica to Rochdale Village to Richmond Hill, no one part of the area Nunes seeks to advocate for has fared any better during this economic crisis. “We sort of get the brunt of employees being laid off — the complete district,” he said.

Harry, the coordinator, observes the impact on her own mountain of plastic bags, which literally vanishes before the afternoon. Each bag contains roughly four meals, including a meat, vegetable, starch and a desert. The crowd moans when she tells them there is no chicken, which they will have to come back for next week.

Under her breath, unsuccessfully fighting the need to separate city charity from her work at the church, she cannot help but say “God bless you” to those who take a bag. They are too proud to blather about what trouble they are in, but Harry can discern from a passing glance how much these people need help.

When Harry took the reins of the food program at Morris Brown in December, the reserve shelves were empty. Co-pastor Mary Reed came in and put her fingertips on each cubbard. “Dear lord, we need an abundance,” she said. Since then, the operation has expanded, the reserves are stocked, and there are two new freezers for perishables. A new stove is expected soon from United Way.

Traditionally, the soup kitchen and food pantry were not open during the summer months, but Harry is making hers a year-round operation. She would never want to turn away someone who needs a bite to eat.

“I pray that we never have to do that,” Harry said. “I am on my knees every day praying that won’t happen.”



The line for food at the Morris Brown A.M.E. Church in Jamaica stretched around the corner Wednesday morning. (photo by Theodore Parisienne)

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