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Huge Donation to The Interfaith Food Pantry in Blacksburg, VA

Mikex Gangloff
The Roanoke Times

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Recommended Citation

Gangloff, Mikex, "Huge Donation to The Interfaith Food Pantry in Blacksburg, VA" (2020). *Covid-19 Archive: Documents*. 113.

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35,000 pounds: Blacksburg food pantry receives largest donation in its 30 years

BY MIKE GANGLOFF

The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — The Interfaith Food Pantry on Thursday received the largest donation in its three-decade history.

A tractor-trailer pulled in at midday with a gift from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — 35,566 pounds of non-perishable food, driven across the country from the church's Utah headquarters.

A small group of volunteers — and reporters — waited in the rain. They had a forklift to more easily unload the pallets of food.

"This is by far the biggest" donation ever received by the pantry, Executive Director Vern Simpson said Wednesday, describing himself as "overwhelmed" by the contribution.

There is so much food coming that the Interfaith Pantry plans to divide it with two other area organizations that provide

food to residents in need: City of Refuge in Pulaski County and Beans and Rice, through its Radford location and shared with the New River Community Action food bank there.

Launched in 1987, Interfaith Pantry is a program of New River Community Action and a joint ministry of more than 25 Blacksburg churches. It provides sustenance each month to recipients who are screened for need, feeding an average of 250 families from Blacksburg and the McCoy area of Montgomery County, or a total of more than 600 people, Simpson said.

That abruptly became more difficult last month as COVID-19 worries caused grocery shelves to empty. The pantry could not buy the items with which it usually supplements the many local donations that support it.

But help already was on the way, summoned by Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints representative Jackie Grosebeck.

Grosebeck, who lives in Dublin, is a missionary to a territory that takes in a wide area of Western and Southwest Virginia, as well as a large section of West Virginia. Before moving to Pulaski County, she and her husband were long-time residents of Blacksburg and volunteered at the Interfaith Pantry, she said.

In early March, Grosebeck got word that Bishops' Central Storehouse, a church facility in Salt Lake City that sends food and emergency supplies to disaster sites around the country, was overstocked. Church leaders were looking for worthy recipients. Grosebeck said she quickly nominated Interfaith Pantry.

The truck coming to Blacksburg is part of a new wave of 15 trucks from the central storehouse heading to the Mid-At-

Grosebeck said. She described the gifts in terms of religious duty, saying the church is "really trying to live that Second Great Commandment of loving thy neighbor."

The food on the truck should include beef stew, chili, tomato sauce, green and black beans, applesauce, flour, sugar, canola oil, pasta and more. Much of the food is prepared and packaged by volunteers in church-operated canneries, Grosebeck said.

The pantry's largest donation each year is usually 8,000 or 9,000 pounds of food brought in by the Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, which has been postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic. The usual group of 200 or so volunteers that operate Interfaith Pantry has been cut to about 25, Simpson said.

Simpson said that Interfaith Pantry so far has not seen increased requests for food.

Still, Interfaith Pantry usually gives out about two tons of food weekly, he said — "so you can go through food really fast."

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