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C.A.S.E. Continues Mission to Help Local Families in Need

By Brian Simon

While Southern California has endured some rough economic stretches in its history, one of the worst periods was in 1992 when a major recession led to a particularly severe downturn. The South Bay, and El Segundo in particular, suffered extensive layoffs in defense and aerospace as well as in other sectors. This, along with plummeting home values and record-high unemployment, left many local families in crisis mode. Concerned that some residents struggled to put food on the table, a small group of area church leaders sprang into action and devised a game plan to help out by establishing a pantry to provide groceries and household supplies to those in need. And so was born the Community Alliance to Support and Empower, better known as C.A.S.E. Thirty-four years later, it continues to play a crucial role in keeping the community intact during challenging times. "C.A.S.E. is an 'Alliance' of volunteers who feed, or 'Supports' El Segundo families with free food and household supplies, 'Empowering' them to reserve their limited funds for rent and utilities so they can remain in their El Segundo homes and send their children to our wonderful schools," Josette Murphy, a long-time volunteer who oversees outreach, said.

While circumstances today are not quite as dire as they were in 1992, C.A.S.E.'s client roster has nearly doubled in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic cited as a key reason for the uptick. The current inflation, high food and gas prices, plus expensive housing costs, create hardships that

some families can't quite overcome. The situation often worsens as donations to the pantry tend to drop during the warm weather months. "We encourage the community to keep up the good work this summer season," Murphy said. "Hunger knows no schedule. Folks need to eat every day."

C.A.S.E. now serves 42 local families, totaling 126 individuals. Eligibility requires at least six months of residency in El Segundo and the courage to ask for help. Volunteers then conduct interviews with applicants to verify their addresses and gain a sense of

their circumstances. "We also direct them to other sources of assistance such as SNAP," Murphy said.

Under the program, clients can shop the pantry twice a month to pick up household necessities. The list of most-needed shelf-stable food and cleaning/hygiene supplies can be found online at CASEpantryelsegundo.org. The alliance also provides some monetary assistance, such as \$25 Ralph's gift certificates for perishable foods, as well as support for other expenses based on need.

"Financial donations can be made online or mailed to our PO Box 1585, El Segundo, 90245," Murphy said. "Pantry items and checks can be dropped off anytime at 305 Richmond Street. We also encourage local groups to host a food drive. Those interested may email the volunteer team through the website to coordinate large donation logistics."

C.A.S.E.'s board of directors oversees its operations and pantry. Its president, Rt.

Weekend Forecast

Friday

Mostly
Sunny
63°/70°



Saturday

AM Clouds/
PM Sun
62°/71°



Sunday

AM Clouds/
PM Sun
61°/69°

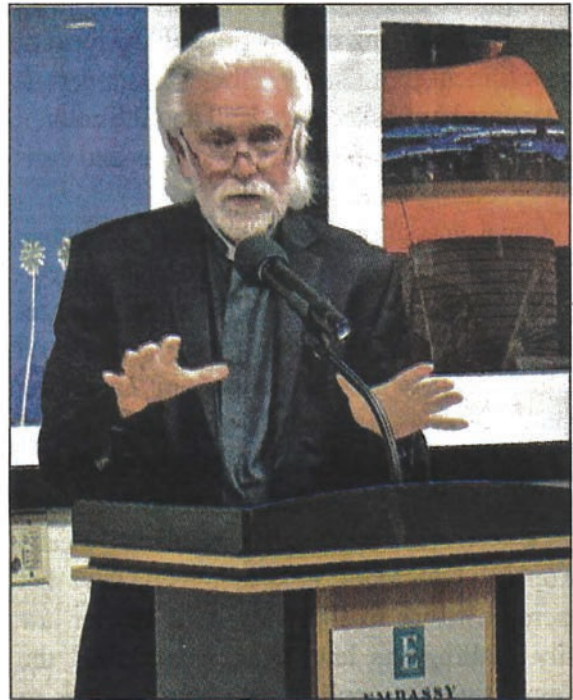


Rev. Archimandrite Alexei Smith is one of the original founders and the longest-standing volunteer. The other board members include Polly Price, vice president with 30 years of service; Brenda Ross, treasurer with 17 years of involvement; and Nancy Jacobsen, secretary with 30 years devoted to the cause. A subcommittee of four to five additional volunteers manages fundraising, donation drives, and community outreach. "The C.A.S.E. team donates all their time, and there have never been any paid positions," Murphy emphasized.

C.A.S.E.'s clients run the demographic gamut from infants all the way to the elderly. The most common are multi-generational families under one roof in small apartments, individuals with physical and mental challenges that prohibit them from getting a job, and those with financial setbacks due to tragedy or illness. "Every client of working age is either actively looking for work after a job loss, or employed in a low-paying job, often a service position," Murphy explained. "They are all just folks doing their best to improve their situation, and our volunteers know each of them personally."

Many of the folks in question credit C.A.S.E. with being a godsend during the most trying periods of hardship. While their names can't be revealed to protect privacy, several provided testimonials. "C.A.S.E. has not only helped my family with keeping our pantry at home stocked with essential items, but also going to the bi-monthly distribution days has been a great way for us to connect," H.H. said.

"C.A.S.E. has been a savior," S.C. commented.



Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Alexei Smith, C.A.S.E. board president and co-founder, was the keynote speaker at the Mayor's Good Friday Breakfast hosted by the El Segundo Rotary Club.

According to F.R., "When I was going through a difficult time in my cancer treatment, they were like angels."

As mentioned above, getting the message to the community becomes especially critical during the summer. To further expand its reach, C.A.S.E. established relationships with various non-profits including school PTAs, youth scout troops, and the service organizations Kiwanis and Rotary, among others. "We are available to speak at these groups' meetings about C.A.S.E. and collaborate with them on food drives," Murphy said. "Our local Beachside Chapter of NCL provides mother-daughter pairs of volunteers to help with ongoing donation logistics and other efforts. The El Segundo Chamber of Commerce has helped us connect with local businesses and encouraged them to include C.A.S.E. in their corporate philanthropy programs and be recognized on our website. Looking ahead, we plan to expand our presence at local community events to further increase the pantry's visibility. Our goal is for every El Segundo resident to know about, and donate to, their local pantry serving their own neighbors." •



C.A.S.E. volunteers accepted a check from Rotary for \$4,350. Left to right: Julie Stolnack, C.A.S.E. volunteer and Rotarian; Nancy Jacobsen, C.A.S.E. board secretary and Rotarian; Brenda Ross, C.A.S.E. board treasurer; Gilda Dyckman, Rotary president, presenting the donation check; Polly Price, C.A.S.E. board vice president; Kelly Remmer, C.A.S.E. volunteer and Rotarian; Patti Kohler, C.A.S.E. volunteer; Josette Murphy, C.A.S.E. volunteer; and Mark Dalley, C.A.S.E. pro bono website manager. Photos Provided by Ed Su.