

Great Neck members a driving force for good

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With their social justice mission guiding them, the Great Neck Teachers Association was able to make two jaw-dropping donations to help community members facing food insecurity.

First the union donated \$15,000 to a local Long Island food pantry. The woman who opened the envelope and saw the check called the TA pointing out the union had added too many zeroes. It hadn't.

The union next donated another \$15,000 — this time to the Great Neck Rotary Club, which assists families in need and local restaurants by purchasing food for twice weekly deliveries.

"It's just this great outreach that's so inclusive, with educators, politicians, clergy and local businesses," said Jennifer Snyder, who chairs the GNTA Social Justice Committee and is a union executive board member.

The day before New York State was put on pause, a school counselor relayed to Snyder that the St. Aloysius Interfaith Food Pantry, which educators had helped before with clothing and food drives, had no rice or beans.

"We put out a call to members and three or four people made food deliveries," said Snyder. But the demand on the pantry kept increasing with the aftershocks of the pandemic flattening many families' income. Due to COVID-19 concerns, members could not continue to buy food to donate to the pantry, and there were problems getting food delivered there in bulk.

So, using funds equal to what would have been spent to send officers and delegates to the annual NYSUT Representative Assembly — held virtually this year — and some rebates from the local's VOTE-COPE political action fund contribution, the GNTA's Social Justice Committee got approval to send the \$15,000 donations.

"Social justice is political action," said Snyder.

Located along the "Gold Coast" on the North Shore of Long Island, Snyder says Great Neck has "a tremendous amount of wealth." Hidden among those riches are students and families in need. Out of pride or shame, students typically do not let on about their true situations at home. Some come from families where their parents are laborers. This can mean seasonal work, or given the current pandemic, no work. Some are English language learners.

The school district's social workers have been a good resource for providing more accurate information about the needs of students and their families.

"Our number one goal is to meet the need without the shame," said Snyder of the committee's work.

The union's social justice committee was born from its involvement with the NYSUT Local Action Project, a program that assists unions in building member engagement through community service, political action and coalition building. The Great

Neck team, consisting of members from the TA, the Paraprofessionals Association and the Office Staff Association, heard a presentation by NYSUT Executive Vice President Jolene DiBrango about the statewide union's Women's Committee and committees being formed at the local level. That prompted discussions by the team about concerns relating to women's issues, as well as gun violence, poverty and other matters, Snyder recalled.

"We thought we'd form a social justice committee open to all concerns," she said. The joint units surveyed members and formed a steering committee of seven. Fifty members signed on to become part of the committee.

Because the survey revealed that socio-economic disparity was a big concern, the committee knew where to point its compass when the pandemic hit.

"We're so proud of having a social justice committee," said GNTA President James Daszenski. "We're very excited so many of our members are a driving force."

The social justice committee continues to brainstorm other ways its members can help the community, Snyder said, including a desire to continue to support the Rotary Club food drops throughout the summer.

"This is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to need. I am so very fortunate to be among so many generous, intelligent and caring people. It truly takes a village," Snyder said.



Unions, members meet need exposed by pandemic

NYSUT locals across the state have been intensely busy supporting families, small businesses and communities during the COVID-19 crisis.

Union members are the faces behind gift cards and food purchased at local businesses and provided to families in need. They have been manufacturing and procuring personal protective equipment for health care workers, including a donation by the Carmel Teachers Association to SUNY Downstate Hospital of 1,000 bottles of hand sanitizer. Knowing that in some families, sheltering in place can mean an escalation of violence in the home, Mike Lillis, Lakeland Federation of Teachers; Beth Chetney, Baldwinsville TA; and Kevin Coyne, Brentwood TA, banded together to donate to help victims of domestic violence.

"NYSUT locals and members across the state continue to step up for their students, their patients, their colleagues and their communities," said NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer J. Philippe Abraham, whose office directs the statewide union's social justice mission. That generosity includes donations of more than \$120,000 to the NYSUT Disaster Relief Fund to support health care workers and others on the front lines.

Local unions from every part of the state have donated funds and supplies to food pantries. Members are also stepping in to secure toiletries and other essentials.

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