

LOCAL NEWS

Blessing Boxes help keep food on the tables of Placentia families



Marilyn Anderson fills the the Blessing Box outside the Whitten Community Center with food she's collected from friends and neighbors in Placentia, on Tuesday, May 23, 2017. (Photo by Nick Agro, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **DENISSE SALAZAR** | local@ocregister.com | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: May 31, 2017 at 12:01 p.m. | UPDATED: June 2, 2017 at 11:42 a.m.

Marilyn Anderson opened the doors of a wood cabinet by the park's playground and arranged on the two shelves boxes of pasta and cans for soup and vegetables.

Shortly after, another woman reached in, taking some pasta.



The unlocked cabinet, dubbed a “Blessing Box,” works simply: If you have food, leave food; if you need food, take food.

The concept is similar to the Little Free Libraries that have popped up across Orange County.

Anderson, who organized the construction of the boxes in two Placentia parks, said her inspiration came from a news report about a Texas town that built something similar and a friend’s children who make “blessing bags” to give to people asking for money.

“I thought how can we combine this and make this work in Placentia,” Anderson said. “How can we do this in our community?”

After meeting with the city and community volunteers to identify areas with a high poverty rate, the blessing boxes were built at Kraemer Park and the Whitten Community Center during the recent Love Placentia day of service.

“My hope is that the citizens of Placentia will contribute to it and will help us help those who need more help,” said Sandra Gonzalez, Placentia’s community services director. “I definitely think it will be beneficial to families in need.”

Guadalupe Gutierrez walked over to the Blessing Box at the Whitten Center after picking up her kids from school. She took some pasta.

“Sometimes it’s hard to make ends meet,” said Gutierrez, 35, who has four children ages 10 to 16. “I come two to three times a week.”

Two years ago her husband was diagnosed with cancer and had to stop working. He has returned to work, but there are times when he gets scheduled to work less than 40 hours a week.

“That’s when we don’t have enough money to buy enough food to feed four mouths,” she said in Spanish, adding the food donations help her get through the week.

Azucena Antolino, 35, also stopped by the Blessing Box to get pasta.

“This concept is great because there are people who can’t come to the food distribution in the morning because they are working, but they can come in the afternoon and get what they need from the blessing box,” Antolino, who has three children, said in Spanish.

The Whitten Center also offers food distribution programs a couple times a week.



“There are so many people that come here to get food,” said Rosemary Carbajal, a food service assistant at Placentia Head Start, which is steps away from the community center. “It’s unbelievable when you see so many people in need.”

Anderson said about 90 percent of the food in the Blessing Boxes are donated by friends, neighbors and church members. She also buys some of the most popular items such as pasta and peanut butter, but is hoping community organizations and groups will step forward to sponsor the boxes for a week or a month. Volunteers are also needed to keep the boxes clean and graffiti-free.

“We are just at the beginning and so far it’s been working out really well,” Anderson said of people abiding by the honors system. “I just hope it catches on and grows.”

Anderson, who didn’t know of any other Orange County communities with the boxes, said she hopes to build two more of the outdoor pantries next year.

“I’m really a strong believer in the power of community people coming together and helping each other and lifting the community,” Anderson said.

To learn how to get involved, visit loveplacentia.com or contact Marilyn Anderson at marilyn_and@att.net.

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