

Food Pantry LAX



Autumn 2024

Customer Profiles: Margarita and Sawmak

Food Pantry LAX assists people in various ways. For Sawmak Soetan, a young man who is never without his skateboard, it is helping tide him over what is hopefully a temporary bout of homelessness and unemployment. For Margarita Meza, a retiree struggling to get by on a fixed income, the free food she obtains from the pantry saves her money she can use to pay rent and other expenses.

Margarita, 69, was born in Mexico and came to the United States about 30 years ago, eventually becoming a citizen. She has two grown children and two grandchildren for whom she likes to babysit.

She worked as a house cleaner but had to quit about four years ago because of back problems. A year later, she lost her husband. "Things started getting hard when he passed away," she said.

She lives on Social Security and a small pension, but found it hard to make ends meet. She found Food Pantry LAX through an online search and has been coming for about a year. "Food is expensive and this helps me a lot," she said.



Margarita, in orange top

Sawmak, 24, has been coming to the pantry only since he and his mother were evicted from their apartment a few months ago. She went to stay with friends but he began to live on the street. He sleeps "just anywhere I can find a spot," he said. "Sometimes I'll stay up all night and then go to sleep at the library."

Sawmak, who grew up in Los Angeles, went to culinary school after high school and

was working as a chef but was living paycheck to paycheck. And after losing his home, he lost his job. "It's kind of hard, you know, being homeless, to keep a job," he said.

He has visited various food pantries, but said he liked Food Pantry LAX even though it requires that he take one or two buses to reach us. That is because the pantry is always open when it is supposed to be. "I like this one because of the consistency," he said. He always requests the bag the pantry prepares for homeless clients – one in which none of the food has to be cooked or refrigerated. "It helps a lot," he said, saying that sometimes he feels like "I'm really really starving."

Sawmak hopes to turn his life around by joining the National Guard. He said he has basically been accepted pending a doctor's note clearing him regarding a shoulder dislocation he suffered when he was younger. He eventually hopes to train for a career in healthcare.

"I get to serve my country and pursue my passions," he said. "I'm just waiting to ship out." 🍅

Volunteers of the Year: Mike and Karen Cross

When Mike Cross ran his printing business in Westchester, one of the jobs that came his way was to print the occasional newsletter for Food Pantry LAX – earlier versions of the document you are now reading. After learning what the pantry was doing, Mike asked if there was some way he could help. That led to a relationship eventually resulting in the pantry honoring Mike and his wife, Karen, as our volunteers of the year.

For several years, Mike and Karen have been performing a tough job, one unseen by the pantry’s clients and even by most of its other volunteers. Every Thursday morning at 7 a.m., they pick up about 2,000 pounds of food from the Westside Food Bank in Santa Monica, bring it to the pantry and unload it. It is one of a number of unsung jobs essential for the pantry to be able to fulfill its mission of providing food to those in need.

Mike and Karen are able to do this because Mike has a heavy-



From left, Volunteers of the Year Mike and Karen Cross, with Andy Pollack, President, Food Pantry LAX.

duty pickup truck. At age 71, he still participates in drag races, and uses the truck to pull his car to the events. Mike also plays on a traveling softball team, some tournaments out of state.

Mike was born in Santa Monica and has lived on the Westside all his life. He got into the printing business out of high school and had his own business for 35 years before selling it a few years ago.

Karen makes sure the couple gets up early enough on Thursday mornings to make it to the food bank by 7. Karen is an upbeat woman who grew up in Santa Barbara. The couple met in the 1980s through work. Both were scuba divers and after lunch on their first date, they went together on an ocean dive.

Karen worked for the Marriott

in Marina del Rey before getting her CPA certification. She then worked for various companies. Mike and Karen have two children. Their son is an astrophysicist who does research in the United States Space Force; their daughter is an insurance underwriter focused on the entertainment industry.

Mike and Karen were presented with the Volunteer of the Year award at the pantry’s annual meeting in late May, at Covenant Presbyterian Church. Until their names were called, most people in the room did not know who they were, because of the behind-the-scenes nature of their work. Hopefully, the award will bring this generous and unsung couple the recognition they deserve from the pantry, its clients and the greater community. ●

Quick Fact: Food Pantry LAX gave out more than 200,000 pounds of food last year.

Willie Hodges: Retirement was not an Option



Willie Hodges, continuing his service to Food Pantry LAX

When Willie Hodges was about to retire, a member of his church who happened to be the president of Food Pantry LAX told him that once he was no longer working, he would become the pantry's treasurer. Willie, seeming to have little choice in the matter, agreed.

"They really needed a new treasurer," he recalled. The previous treasurer had quit months before, leaving the pantry in arrears on some payments. So Willie went from running a huge water treatment plant for the Los

Angeles Department of Water and Power to tracking the expenses of a small non-profit organization.

That was in 1998. Willie remained the treasurer for the next 25 years, through good times and hard times. Now, at 79, he has stepped down as treasurer, marking the end of an era.

Willie is the pantry's longest serving active volunteer and has seen a lot of changes. When he started, the pantry had a couple of paid employees, though it is now all volunteer. Later, the pantry lost its facility at the location now occupied by CarMax, and operated out of local churches for several years. It was also in dire financial straits before a big bequest around 2006 gave the pantry the means to be able to rent its current facility in Inglewood. One of the big improvements over the years, Willie says, is that the pantry now gives out a much greater variety of food than it did when he started.

Willie grew up in Tennessee, studied civil engineering at Vanderbilt University and received a master's degree from Berkeley. He then moved to southern California to begin his 30-year career with LADWP. He and his wife, Pam, have lived in Westchester since 1969. They have two children and three grandchildren. An avid Dodgers

fan, Willie has had season tickets for 38 years and boasts a truly astonishing collection of Dodger bobbleheads. Willie now proudly wears a 2024 World Series Champions Dodgers cap at the pantry.

Besides serving as treasurer, Willie has long volunteered at the pantry itself. For many years he did much of the pantry's food-shopping. He also recruited several of his bridge and tennis partners to volunteer at the pantry. He takes greatest pride in "keeping it [the pantry] going" through the hard times, when he had to make sure that each check he wrote would not bounce.

At its annual meeting in late May, 2024, at Covenant Presbyterian Church, which is also Willie's church, the pantry board presented a plaque that thanked Willie for "decades of selfless service to the pantry and its clients. You have made a difference in the lives of so many!"

While Willie has been succeeded as treasurer by Steve McCollum, he remains a member of the pantry's board and still helps out at the pantry twice a week. Hopefully we will benefit from his wisdom and experience for a long time to come. He also remains the treasurer of Covenant Presbyterian Church, a job he has had even longer than his post at Food Pantry LAX. 🍎

Please Join our Christmas Food Drive!

Every year just before Christmas, Food Pantry LAX gives out bags with special food items, so customers can make a nice holiday meal.

This year these bags will be distributed on Tuesday, Dec. 17, and Friday, Dec. 20. Anybody is welcome to purchase the menu items listed below and donate them to the "Bag-it-Up" drive.

It helps if the foods are put into a large, sturdy, reusable shopping bag.

Completed bags may be returned to participating churches by Sunday, Dec. 8. Or they may be brought to Food Pantry LAX on Tuesday Dec. 10, or Friday Dec. 13, between 8:00 am and 12:00 noon.

If you cannot get all the items on the list, don't worry! Pantry volunteers will check and complete each bag before it is given out. Any donation would help greatly to provide a festive meal to grateful people. 🍅



Last year's completed Christmas bags about to be distributed to waiting customers



Menu

- 1 Can (16oz) Ham or other meat (Please no Chicken or Spam)
- 1 Box Dry Cereal
- 2 Cans (15oz) Vegetables
- 1 Can (15oz) Fruit
- 1 Can Soup (no broth)
- 1 Jar (no glass) Jam or Jelly
- 1 Jar (no glass) Peanut Butter
- 1 Package each Cake mix & frosting or complete dessert mix
- 1 Package Pancake Mix
- 1 Package Potatoes (such as mashed, scalloped, au gratin)
- 2 Boxes Macaroni and Cheese
- 1 Package Pudding or Jello

Food Pantry LAX

Food Distribution:

Tuesdays and Fridays
9:30am – 12 noon

Location:

355 East Beach Avenue
Inglewood, CA 90302

Phone: 310-677-5597

Mailing address:

6201 W. 87th St.
#320, PMB 741
Los Angeles, CA 90045

Email:

FoodpantryLAX@gmail.com

Website:

Foodpantrylax.org

EIN Number: 95-4036782

Thank you to our food contributors

Westside Food Bank ♦ Vons, Centinela Avenue ♦ Bristol Farms, Manhattan Beach
 Cadoro Bakery ♦ Food Forward / Social Justice Learning Institute ♦ Gjusta Bakery
 Holy Nativity Episcopal Church community garden ♦ Togo's, Westchester
 Noah's NY Bagels, Marina del Rey ♦ Westchester Farmer's Market
 Manhattan Bread & Bagel, Manhattan Beach