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Heroes Fighting Hunger

Washington, PA -- In December, when Governor Wolf announced a second round of restrictions on indoor dining for restaurants, Dan Smith, the President and CEO at Equipment & Controls Inc. in Lawrence, PA, had an idea.

"It started with a conversation at the kitchen table," Smith explained. "I saw two big problems. You have local restaurant owners who have been in the community for years and have battled through COVID since March. They probably just ordered all this inventory for the holidays and now they're forced to shut down. And then you also have people in the community who can't afford to eat. And I just thought, if we could get the right people involved and put the funding in the right place, maybe we could put a dent in both of these problems."

Smith called his long-time friend, City Mission's Chief Financial Officer, Denny Kennedy. They had worked together years ago when Kennedy was the CFO at Smith's company.

When Smith and Kennedy brought the idea to City Mission's President/CEO Dean Gartland, his first thought was, "what a tremendous idea. This can be a win-win for everyone involved. We started working right away to make this idea a reality."

"Really, all I had was an idea," said Smith. "All the credit goes to the folks who went out and made it happen. I couldn't believe how fast it all came together and how passionate everyone at the Mission was to get this going."

Smith made an initial donation to City Mission, and the *Heroes Fighting Hunger* program was born. City Mission used the funds to purchase meals from local restaurants for the homeless residents living on their campus. So far, the program has supported 15 local restaurants and provided over 7500 total meals for City Mission residents throughout the months of January, February, and now into March.

"This is just a massive win-win for restaurants struggling with lowered revenue due to COVID-19, and for our residents here at the Mission as well," said City Mission's Chief Development Officer, Dr. Sally Mounts, who joined the program early on and quickly jumped into action.

Mounts reached out to generous donors in the community, and using Smith's initial donation as a matching gift, was able to raise even more money for the cause. Major donors to the new program include: Brian and Karen Shanahan, Mike and Kathy Makripodis, Jon Halpern of Pineapple Payments, and others.

"We're all struggling to get to the other side of this terrible pandemic," added Mounts. "Anything that unites us in this effort is a bonus for the whole community. And since so much of our ministry centers around food and shelter, it helped us provide a real bright spot for our residents."

City Mission typically relies on food donations to keep costs low and financial donations to provide meals for the residents who depend on them for food and shelter every day. But the generous donations received as part of this project, enabled the Mission to spend more per meal this month, which helped not only to support local restaurants but also to offer their residents more upscale meals and a greater variety of options.

City Mission's Food Services Manager, Judy Sandy, came on board to organize the project, contact the restaurants, and put together a meal schedule. "It's exciting," she said. "It's good for the restaurants and for our residents."

Sandy reached out initially to eleven different restaurants who have worked with the Mission in the past, and every single one of them said yes.

"And it's special for our residents too," she added. "The variety of the meals is incredible. It's like they're getting to eat out every day. These are places they can't typically go, and these restaurants are actually coming to us. And the residents are so grateful. When they come in and see the food it's like they're thinking, 'is this really for me? Do people really care this much about me?' It makes me cry to even think about it."

Chicco Baccello, a small coffee house, bakery, and deli in Washington, was one of the first restaurants the Mission approached with this idea. Every Tuesday in the month of March, Chicco Baccello is providing lunch for the residents at City Mission by making deli sandwiches made with the highest-quality meats and cheeses along with side dishes like macaroni salad made in-house.

"We're in close proximity to City Mission," said Lisa Aprea, one of the owners at Chicco Baccello. "We have regulars who stop in that work at the Mission. We've participated in their Sweet Sunday event in the past, and we participated again this year. So they know our coffee, our food."

In the beginning, the pandemic hit their business pretty hard. Aprea explained, "We knew we had to adapt. We had to be willing to change the way we did things or we weren't going to make it. We made online orders available and offered curbside pickup. And our community has been extremely supportive."

When City Mission approached Aprea with the idea, she was excited and grateful. "What a wonderful thing to do to bless small businesses and the residents of City Mission. And it isn't just about the added revenue we'll get this month -- what a blessing it is for us to make 100 sandwiches for the residents at the Mission. Our staff is excited to do it."

City Mission is planning to complete this program at the end of the month as in-dining restrictions ease and funding for the project winds down. But you can always help provide meals to those in need at the Mission. Call 724-222-8530 or visit www.citymission.org for more information.

About City Mission: For over 75 years, City Mission has sheltered, healed, and restored the homeless to independent living—without discrimination. City Mission's comprehensive program addresses both short-term needs like food and shelter, and long-term needs, including drug and alcohol counseling, mental health and medical treatment, legal aid, and employment training. City Mission's goal is to help each man, woman, mother with children, or veteran who walks through our doors to become a healthy, productive member of society. With your help, we can help our residents renew their lives.