

Pop up produce market offers fresh food

Mountain Roots bridges gaps brought on by pandemic

Lined along the edge of South Main Street Saturday, people stand as if waiting for a parade. But they're wearing face masks, carrying grocery bags, and standing at six-foot intervals marked in chalked drawings of flowers on the pavement.

It's no parade — the line up is for the third fresh food giveaway event hosted by local nonprofit Mountain Roots Food Project.

Hand in hand, a three-year-old girl and her mother and grandmother join the queue. They're greeted warmly in Spanish by volunteer Karen Immerso, and the mothers are given a fresh, colorful rose in honor of Mother's Day.

The Free Pop-Up Produce Market, held on Saturdays, included more than 2,000 pounds of potatoes that were donated to the Gunnison Country Food Pantry, along with a variety of fresh food items, such as lettuce, spinach, kale; fruits such as apples and pears; vegetable including beets, radishes, zucchini, yellow squash and more. Donning masks and blue gloves, five volunteers joined Mountain Roots' staff members to distribute the food.

Western Colorado University student Sean Kohler, a food security intern with Mountain Roots, talked with people while they stood in line, six feet apart. He asked a few questions, while Immerso translated. He wanted to know how people found out about the free market, how many people they are feeding at home, and also what kinds of food they need the most. Fresh fruits and vegetables were at the top of the list for more than 80 percent of the people, with eggs coming in third.

Social distancing and public health guidelines were strictly followed. At the head of the line, guests sanitized their hands while Kohler explained the layout.

"You'll go one table at a time,

MOUNTAIN ROOTS POP UP PRODUCE MARKET

The free Pop Up Produce Market will be held on Saturdays at 515 South Main Gunnison from 10 a.m. to noon, with a Spanish hour for the immigrant community from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. More information is available on the Mountain Roots facebook page or on the web at www.mountainrootsfoodproject.org.

one person at each table. There are different fruits and vegetables at each table. Please allow our team to handle the food. You can take whatever you can use," he said.

Those who were there were grateful for the fresh produce — they struggle for the basics.

"We just came with like a 15-minute notice," said Starr Vargas, who found out about the giveaway on Facebook. "It helps provide a lot for our community. We really appreciate it very much, especially right now because everybody's having a hard time financially. A lot of people are really struggling right now ... this helps a lot."

The organization has been on the front lines of emergency food relief since the beginning of the pandemic, working with community partners including the Gunnison Country Food Pantry, Gunnison County, Gunnison Watershed School District and Bethany Baptist, to quickly determine the need, evaluate how needs are changing, to take fast action to fill gaps. The Mountain Roots \$0-\$20 Supper Program, now in its fifth week, has distributed more than 3,000 meals to families and provided some steady revenue to eight local restaurants. With an infusion of funds from No Kid Hungry, a collaborative grant recently awarded to the group of key food relief partners, the organization is preparing to run the supper program for another six weeks, and with support from the community and Gunnison County, the program is now open to seniors and individuals.

"There are a lot of amazing



Mountain Roots intern Sean Kohler is seen chatting with a market shopper.

Courtesy



Mountain Roots staff were on site helping with food distribution.

food relief efforts going on in our valley right now, especially at the north end of the valley," observed Holly Conn, Executive Director of Mountain Roots. "The community is really coming together. And the Supper Program has been amazing. But even under normal circumstances, the need in Gunnison is higher. We wanted to make sure no group of people was being left out, even unintentionally. And we wanted to find out what people still needed. So we asked."

Several Mountain Roots staff members who have been filling shifts at the food pantry saw that while the number of patrons requesting food has increased dramatically, the volume of fresh food has remained relatively the same, meaning each person is receiving less fresh food per distribution. Then, through a loosely organized phone tree, Conn learned that particularly

within the immigrant community, fresh fruits and vegetables were scarce.

"One woman told us, 'as long as I have flour and water, I can make tortillas, so I'm not starving,'" Conn explained, "But we want people to be nourished, not just fed."

So Conn applied for COVID-19 relief funds and when Mountain Roots received a \$9,000 award from the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, she knew exactly where to put the money — fresh produce. The grant includes an extra \$500 to source food from local and regional farms.

"I was really impressed with the spread," said a university student who wanted to remain anonymous, "I have never gone to the food pantry before, but I like the style of this free market. I'm glad Mountain Roots is going to such lengths to bring in

fresh food for us in Gunnison."

Conn estimates the number of people attending will double in the next couple of weeks, and plans to bring in even more fresh food to distribute, increasing the amount of food purchased from local farmers as their early harvests begin to come in. Mountain Roots currently has funding for three to four weeks of the free pop up markets. The organization is also accepting donations on their website.

"If you have a need, we want to help," said Conn. "And if you're able to contribute, we'll be sure your donation goes to help feed our valley."

(Mountain Roots is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to cultivate a resilient and healthy food system in the Gunnison Valley.)

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