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16 Youth food pantry goes mobile

Story and photos by Gregg McQueen

On Veterans Day, this past Mon. Nov. 12th, youth volunteers at the Helping Hands Food Pantry in Inwood mobilized to bring food and supplies to New Yorkers in need after the devastating effects of Hurricane Sandy.

Helping Hands, housed in Holy Trinity Church on Cumming Street, is the city's only youth-run food pantry — kids between the ages of 10 and 18 stock shelves, pack delivery bags, load carts and hand out food.

One day per month, the pantry gives out 300 bags of food to people in need who visit the church, and delivers another 30 bags to elderly, homebound locals — donations that feed about 2,500 locals each month. The pantry is operated by Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI), an organization that gets Washington Heights and Inwood young people involved in community service and fosters leadership skills.

This Veterans Day, spurred by the aftermath of Sandy and armed with a \$10,000 grant for disaster relief from the Abram & Ray Kaplan Foundation, the pantry rented vans to distribute outside the neighborhood for the first time.

"We wanted to bring help to where it's needed most," said FYI executive director Steve Ramos. "And we wanted our upper



FYI youth volunteers at Inwood Helping Hands Food Pantry gathered to help New Yorkers in need.

Manhattan kids, who were largely spared by the storm, to see first-hand how people were affected."

One van brought bags of food to the Puerto Rican Family Institute's Mental Health Clinic in lower Manhattan, where clients had lost all of their perishable food due to the lower Manhattan power outages. Many had used an entire month's ration of food stamps to purchase the food that spoiled and could not afford to buy more.

The pantry used a second van to bring much-needed supplies to Staten Island, including food, toiletries and sleeping bags that the FYI kids made themselves out of fabric. These

homes were targeted at people whose holiday packing bags of food and delivering the supplies.

Ten youth volunteers spent their school time and that is really special." Ramos explained that it's all a part of FYI's mission to instill the desire in young people to assist and serve others.

"Hopefully this becomes part of who these kids are in the future," he said. "How many kids can say they helped feed 80 needy people on their holiday from school?"



Volunteers Joshua and Derek.

Peregrin, age 18, who has volunteered with FYI for nine years.

At the Puerto Rican Family Institute, staffers were grateful for the donations made by the pantry.

"These kids are really making a difference to our clients' lives," stated Yolanda Alicea-Winn, director of the mental health division at PRFI. "And this is something they don't have to do. They volunteer to do it on their own time and that is really special."

"We packed 60 food bags in 30 minutes," said volunteer Joshua Baez, 11. "This will really help out folks who need it."

The reaction from recipients of the pantry donations is what motivates the FYI youth's volunteerism. "When you see the happy look on people's faces, it makes you feel you've done something good," said Derek Brown, age 11.

"It's very inspirational," added Eileen