

Printed from THE DAILY JOURNAL, dtd. 11/22/2013

Singing in the holiday cheer: San Mateo High School celebrates annual food drive with holiday performance

November 22, 2013, 05:00 AM By Samantha Weigel Daily Journal staff

San Mateo High School students are pairing up with the Samaritan House and Second Harvest Food Bank to kick off the holiday giving season with a choir performance at the Hillsdale Shopping Center Saturday.

The school's annual food drive started Nov. 15 and lasts through Dec. 2.

"I think the holidays are a time of coming together as a family. I think one of the best parts of a holiday is having a meal together with your family and it's so unfortunate that people in our country don't have that luxury," said Rachel Royce, a senior at the school and the co-community service commissioner for the drive.

Students set up at various grocery stores from Millbrae to Redwood City to participate in giving back to the community by collecting food and monetary donations, said Sara Catalli, leadership teacher and activities director at the school. The bulk of the work for the drive is done by students in the leadership class who collect, move and store the food; but the whole school participates by contributing and gathering donations from neighbors, Catalli said.

"We work together as a collective student body toward our common goal," Royce said.

The students aren't just brightening the holidays for those in the community at large, they're helping students within their school, Catalli said.

"Our school is so socially, economically and ethnically diverse, that when you hear the statistics that one in 10 people in San Mateo County need our help, that includes people in our own school," Royce said.

The school's food drive dates back to the 1980s when it paired up with the nearby Samaritan House. Over the years, the students' efforts became so successful that Samaritan House asked them to pair up with a food bank that had trucks and resources to help process the donations. About nine years ago, the school began to work with the Second Harvest Food Bank, Catalli said.

Samaritan House distributes tens of thousands of pounds of food to families during the holidays and the school plays a substantial role, said Samaritan House spokeswoman Marcy Spiker.

"The San Mateo High School Canned Food Drive is an extremely important part of Samaritan House's holiday food program and we are extremely fortunate to work with such an enthusiastic and community-minded group of teens," Spiker said.

This is the first year the school will highlight its charity with a public performance. Shawn Reifschneider is the school's choir teacher who also works with Burlingame High School and will be leading 95 choir students to promote the giving spirit.

The students' enthusiasm and energy adds to the spirit and makes them a pleasure to work with, Spiker said.

"People tend to give more during the holiday season because they understand that this is the season of giving," Royce said.

The San Mateo and Burlingame high schools choir performance will be held 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Saturday Nov. 23 at the Nordstrom Court in the Hillsdale Shopping Center.

For more information about the Samaritan House visit www.samaritanhousesanmateo.org. For more information about Second Harvest Food Bank visit www.shfb.org.

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