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My Brother's Workshop Providing a Lifeline

Boxer and My Brother's Workshop Cafe & Bakery Manager Julius Jackson serves up meals Wednesday at the non-profit's cafe on Back Street (photo by the Daily News' Suzanne Carlson).

ST. THOMAS — As many struggle to get through daily life following two devastating hurricanes, My Brother's Workshop is providing a variety of relief efforts throughout the territory.



The nonprofit, which is celebrating its 10th year, has long provided job training and wraparound counseling and support for at-risk youth on the island. But as the storms approached, the group prepared by ordering food through Merchant's Market and setting up a feeding program before the first raindrops fell, said Executive Director Jenny Hawkes.

The organization includes The MBW Café and Bakery on Back Street on St. Thomas, and woodworking shops on St. Thomas and St. Croix. While those facilities are typically used for job training, the café has become a hub of disaster relief while the wood shops have been mobilized to help residents repair damaged homes.

“My Brother’s Workshop is not going to divert from its original mission, which is working with the kids. So, at the same time, we’ve become job creators and then we’re helping to stabilize the economy because we’re going to pay our staff and the kids,” Hawkes said. “It’s a win-win, because we’re going to be job creators, we’re going to feed the community, we’re going to rebuild the community, and we’re a nonprofit so it’s tax deductible.”

The nonprofit began serving meals four days after Irma hit, and is approaching the 10,000 meal mark. 500 to 600 people receive free meals daily at the downtown location, while another 400 to 500 meals are being distributed to various senior homes and other areas for people who cannot travel to the site.



Volunteers and employees of My Brother’s Workshop cook meals for hundreds of people daily at their MBW Cafe and Bakery on Back Street in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas.

Founder Scott Bradley said My Brother’s Workshop is pulling together resources from around the community to help meet residents’ myriad needs.

“Everybody’s pulling together,” Bradley said.

For example, prior to Hurricane Maria, My Brother’s Workshop handed out more than 1,500 sheets of plywood donated by Alpine Security USVI and White Bay Group, 183 Media, and Brad’s Deals. The group helped individuals secure their homes and board up to protect from further damage, and is continuing to help area residents with home repairs following the storms.

Manager Danielle Berry, 28, a sixth-generation St. Thomian of French descent, has been working with a team of staff and volunteers to help put fresh, healthy, nutritious meals out into the community.

“I have really been adamant about making sure that I have vegetarian options,” and fresh produce, Berry said.

Berry said it’s important for people to get as much nutrition as possible to help fight disease and build strength for the hard work ahead.

Head cook and manager Julius Jackson, 30, said he’s taking a break from boxing and sent his wife and baby to the mainland so he can focus on feeding the community.

“We’ve turned our nonprofit school into a soup kitchen, basically. We’re just kind of feeding people that need it,” Jackson said. “It’s a beautiful thing and I think it’s going to help us all. Everybody eats, they feel good, and then they can get to work and do what needs to be done.”

Lucy Sutton, 24, had been working as activities and social media manager for Flamboyant on the Bay, but the resort suffered serious damage in the hurricanes and is closed until further notice.

Sutton and others have been using their unexpected free time to volunteer with the feeding program.

“We have to go do something, people are hungry,” Sutton said. “If I can solve it, then I’m going to.”

Every day, hundreds of people line up outside the café and are served an ever-changing menu of fresh wraps, salads, vegetable dishes and more. The St. Thomas Reformed Church next door is collecting and distributing other supplies like hygiene and cleaning products, so individuals can get a little bit of everything they need in one trip.

In addition to the necessities, the café is providing people an area to eat and socialize, and even a little music to lighten the atmosphere.

Chanelle Schaffer, music director at the Reformed Church, played a selection of tunes on keyboard at the café's courtyard Wednesday with accompaniment on saxophone by Hugh Hunte.

Schaffer said she's inviting other musicians to join so people can have a hearty meal and get a little something "for the soul as well."

Chanelle Schaffer (left) and Hughe Hunte provide entertainment Wednesday during lunch at My Brother's Workshop Cafe.



Hawkes, who lost her own apartment in Hurricane Irma, said volunteers and employees meet daily to discuss the ongoing recovery and prepare to help hundreds more.

The focus is still on the program's youth, which include those ages 16 to 24. Participants are identified through a variety of means, including court-ordered probation and referrals from the Education Department, and receive paid job training and support services.

"We do have kids that come from different gangs on the island, we do have kids that have actually been physically shot or stabbed, so they have some major trauma going on. We do have some kids you know, that later we find out that they're homeless because they don't have any family support. We have some kids who are mentally disabled and so it's very hard, there's not a lot of services on the island for that group of kids," Hawkes said.

The lack of educational and job opportunities on-island is a major hurdle facing all youth, and "some of our kids have never even left the islands, so they don't even know what's out there. And so, losing that hope is very tough. That's why our tag lines are, 'Have you seen hope?' or 'How do you measure a miracle?' because it's really changing their opportunities and their path," she added.

Participants “graduate” from the program after reaching a certain goal, whether it’s finding employment elsewhere, pursuing education or joining the military, and the program’s success rate is around 80 percent, Hawkes said.

“The flipside is that other 20 percent that we haven’t been successful with, those are the kids that probably, they’re in prison, we’ve buried 22 kids, some have been on the waiting list, so it’s a real need for the community,” Hawkes said.

But the majority of participants do go on to brighter opportunities, which Hawkes said is a result of the program’s individualized attention and long-term approach.

“We are trying to think of the long term,” Hawkes said. “Right now, we’re in triage, but we’re trying to think of long term solutions for the economy.”

MBW Café and Bakery is serving free meals daily at their location on Back Street from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. For help with home repairs, send a text message to My Brother’s Workshop with your contact number, name, location, and a short description of what’s needed to 340-514-8303. For more information about how to volunteer and donate, visit My Brother’s Workshop page on Facebook.