

Exposure helps rescue food pantry

By John K. Ryan, The Star

A few weeks back, the future looked bleak for LoQuator Dinkins and those who depend on her for food.

Inability to pay her bills had caused her to have the electricity shut off at her Markham food pantry.

"I was four weeks without lights and lost four freezers worth of food. Generators were brought in to try to keep us going," Dinkins recalled.

"I was considering closing the doors. That's what I told the people coming in to pick up food that day. I'm guessing one of them alerted the media about the situation."

Doing so may have saved the food pantry.

Word went out, first through the Chicago Citizens Newspaper, a neighborhood-based newspaper. Soon, larger newspapers and a few Chicago television stations did stories on Dinkins' struggle to keep open the food pantry she has been running at different sites in Hazel Crest and Markham for nearly 20 years.

On Friday, she was scheduled to appear on ABC Channel 7 News as

one of Harry Porterfield's "Someone You Should Know."

All of this notice has translated into enough donations to not only keep her food pantry open, but to possibly relocate into a larger space that would allow her to expand her services.

The new site is directly across the street from the food pantry at 16710 Richmond Ave., in an industrial park area. The vacant unit offers two floors encompassing 1,800 square feet of space, much more than the current food pantry.

"One of the people who heard about our situation offered to purchase the space across the street which I've had my eye on for a long time," Dinkins said.

"If we did get the place, I'd create a training site to help the homeless get jobs. We'd teach computers or maybe teach them how to prepare and cook food," said Dinkins, who once owned LoQuator's Dining Room restaurant in Harvey.

It was there that she first started offering food to the needy. Dinkins would feed the many homeless people she'd see near her restaurant.

"When you see all that, how can you pass it up? If you do, you don't

have a heart," she said.

After running the restaurant from 1971 to 1984, Dinkins became a foster care parent and started her first food pantry. She helped raise more than 50 foster children, but eventually settled on only operating a food pantry.

Dinkins left her first food pantry site on 167th Street when the rent went up to \$3,000 a month about 10 years ago.

Since then, she's been in the overcrowded Richmond Avenue unit that costs \$1,200 a month. A small office with some furniture sits up front. In the back is a crammed storage area loaded with multiple barrels of toys, shelves of canned goods, five sizable freezers and a double-door cooler.

Dinkins claims the pantry serves, on average, 30 clients a day for the four days a week it is open.

The rent is paid, Dinkins said, by selling donations earmarked to support the food pantry.

"People donate items to support the pantry and I sell them at flea markets or garage sales. I also make Easter baskets and Mother's Day baskets. I sell a couple thousand dollars in baskets every year at

Waterford Estates (Retirement Center in Hazel Crest) every year."

With the recent publicity, the pantry has collected more than \$20,000 in donations and has been promised more, Dinkins said.

"That money paid all our bills for at least two months," she said. "We also managed to pay down our bill to the Greater Chicago Food Depository, where we get the food. That means we're OK for the rest of the year for getting food."

"A (unnamed) donor said he'd make sure we stayed open through the rest of the year. People came from all over the Chicago area to donate. A man traveled two and a half hours to get here. When he saw the generators, he realized the situation and wrote us out a very sizable check. There are lots of nice people out there."

The recent hardships are not the first for the food pantry, said Dinkins, who runs the pantry without any agency or church affiliation.

"We've struggled with paying bills in the past. It's never easy supporting something that doesn't make a profit. But somehow we keep going."

"I believe it's nothing but an act of God. He meant for me to stay here."



Matthew Grotto/The Star

ons (left) talks with President/CEO LoQuator day at LBD Enterprises in Hazel Crest.