

A Food Program for Underserved Communities

Yorkville Common Pantry (YCP) was established in 1980 in the basement of Holy Trinity church in Yorkville, Manhattan. Thirty-one years later, the non-profit, housed in a three-story building in East Harlem, is New York City's largest single-site community based food pantry.

YCP is dedicated to reducing hunger while promoting dignity and self-sufficiency in underserved communities throughout New York City. Their initiatives include food pantries and meal distribution programs, nutrition education, basic hygiene services and support for the homeless.

Last year, YCP served 7,000 families in their Pantry Program and over 8,000 individuals through the Hot Meal Program. In total, they provided over 1.8 million meals.

YCP's volunteer program is the backbone of their success. "Last year, 8,559 volunteers provided 26,615 hours of service to YCP. Volunteers provided 40 percent of our labor hours. This resulted in savings of \$370,000," explains Liz Nellis, Volunteer Coordinator.

Open seven days a week for food distribution and other services, YCP has over 250 volunteers on a weekly basis.

One of those volunteers is by Arturo Marquez, who has been helping out weekly since last summer.

"He is such a breath of fresh air... he's also a great assistance to our Spanish clients, because he is bilingual. Arturo has got that excitement. When you are around him, you are grateful to be a volunteer. He is a bright mark for people," says Erica Santiago, Food Operations Manager for YCP.

Liz Nellis describes Marquez as incredibly enthusiastic, "He is one of our volunteers who is always on call and willing to help at any time. Arturo makes everyone feel welcome and supported."

"I feel so at home here. It was a perfect fit," says Marquez. "I took care of my mother until she was almost 90 years old. She taught me how to give back." When his mother and brother passed away within a few months of each other, Marquez was feeling overcome with loss. A friend who worked at City Harvest suggested that he visit Yorkville Pantry. "Losing my mother and brother, almost simultaneously, was definitely a process for me. Working here has helped me to realize that this is where I get my fulfillment... I am just wired that way."

Marquez, who comes up to three times a week from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. (when he leaves to pick up his 8-year-old son from school), says, "It was a lesson that I wanted to teach my son by example."

"There's a real need in New York City for people that are hungry, especially around this time of year. I have such a sense of fulfillment when I leave here every day. It put my life on purpose, and it puts things into perspective," he adds.

"I had the classical caregivers' syndrome – the one where you are taking care of everyone except yourself."

But since volunteering at the Yorkville Common Pantry, Marquez has put himself on a diet and lost seventy pounds by walking the sixty blocks back and forth to YCP every day. He even gives himself time to stop at places along the way, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or a historic church, to relax and reflect.

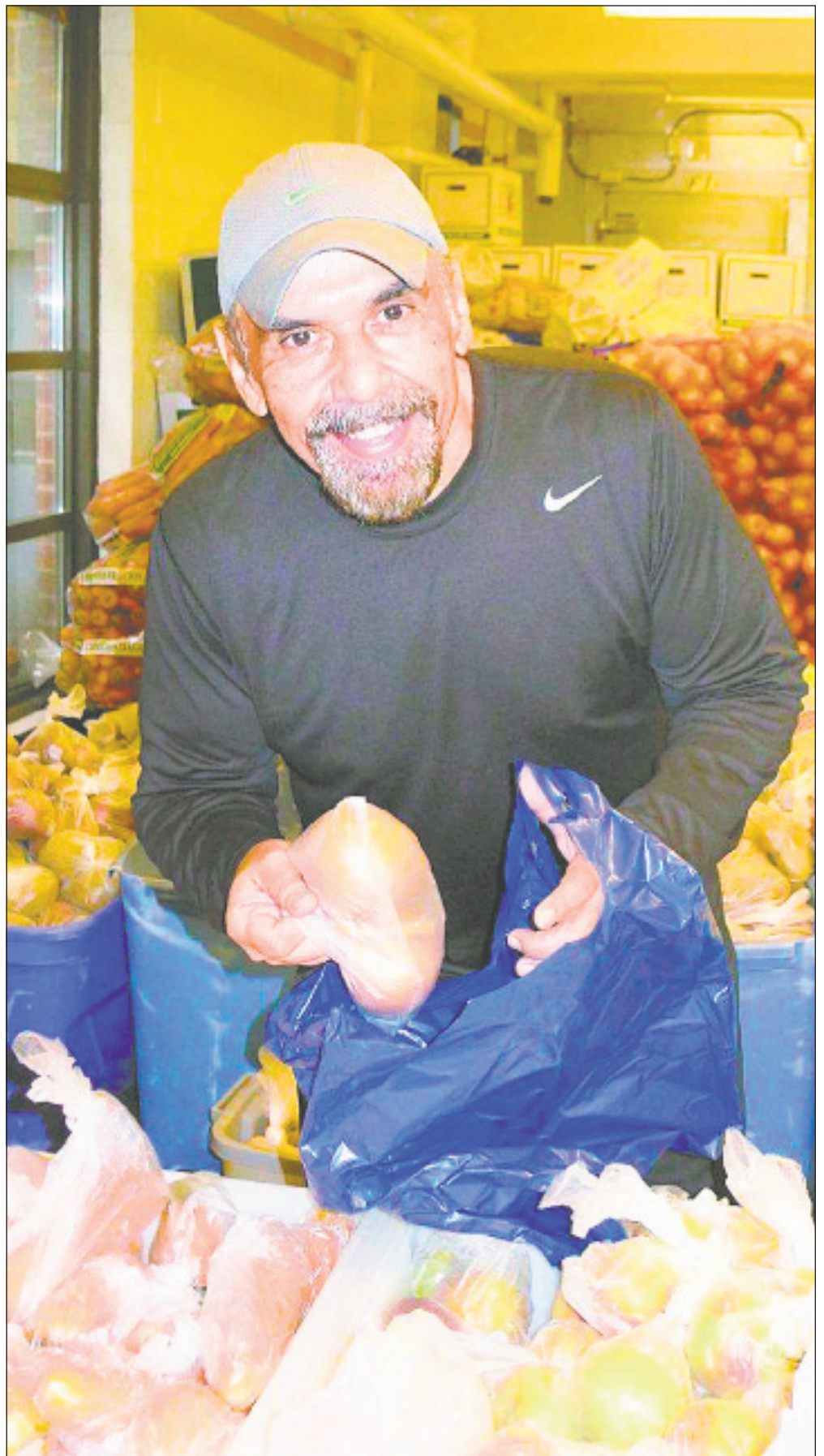
"I have a whole new sense of purpose," he says. Working in pantry distribution, Marquez says that he has gotten to know families on a first name basis.

"The thanks that you get from people puts all of this on a totally different level. There is so much gratitude on a daily basis. I'm so appreciative that this place exists because there is such a need. I don't think that people realize that there's hunger out there," he says.

"Around the holiday season there are so many people that need a lot. This is just my little way of helping get it done. I have a purpose driven life. I just wish I could do more."

For more information call (917) 720-9700 or visit www.YCP.org.

– Holly Reich



Volunteer Arturo Marquez at Yorkville Pantry, New York City's largest single-site community based food pantry.

About Big Town **Big Heart**

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