

## FEEDING SOUTH FLORIDA

# Summer of Service volunteers pack meals



By Alex Kushel

Sun Sentinel Correspondent

GL Homes executives and employees were joined by family members as they recently created meals for children in need to kick off their Summer of Service program at Feeding South Florida in Boynton Beach.

Feeding South Florida launched an eight-week food service program for the second consecutive summer. They delivered meals to six sites last year and expanded to nine sites this year throughout Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

GL Homes had 24 volunteers of all ages participate during the Summer of Service event on June 3 to prepare and package breakfast and lunch meals, which will be delivered for children at selected summer camp locations.

GL Homes provided a \$10,000 donation to Feeding South Florida toward food to be packaged. The children and teens who volunteered at the GL Summer of Service event made breakfast packages for six weeks, which included cereal and fruit. The adults made 150 chicken caesar wraps as well as 300 ham-and-cheddar meals with carrots.

“The days where we get to volunteer our time, give back to the community and include GL associates as well as their family members and kids are the most gratifying days that I personally have,” said Misha Ezratti, president of GL Homes. “I think a lot of the other executives and people who are here feel the same way. It’s extremely rewarding to see everybody kind of roll up their sleeves on a weekend and contribute. It’s just a feel good day.”

He said GL Homes has a long-standing relationship with Feeding

Tamika Volcy works on an assembly line with her GL Homes colleagues to prepare healthy snacks for underserved South Florida children. **CAPEHART/COURTESY**

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Harper Siegel sorts cereal packages at Feeding South Florida in Boynton Beach. **CAPEHART/COURTESY PHOTOS**



The husband-and-wife team of Dr. Brett Shecter, left, and Marcie DePlaza prepare ready-to-eat children's lunches.



GL Homes Chief Marketing Officer Jill DiDonna, left, and GL Homes President Misha Ezratti volunteer at Feeding South Florida.

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South Florida and will participate in events with the organization throughout the year.

"We all take for granted that you are going to have your next meal," Ezratti said. "A lot of people, due to cost of living, inflation and a number of reasons, are not guaranteed their next meal. It means a lot more and it hits home when it's children that you are providing food for. The opportunity for us to kind of step in and fill that gap is tremendous and we jump at any chance we can. A lot of other charities might take a break and things go away for the summer. We try to step up during the summer and kind of fill that void."

GL Homes COO Marcie DePlaza said she was excited for another opportunity to volunteer with Feeding South Florida. She previously created meals for older residents.

"It just feels so good to bring the employees together and to give back to the community," she said. "I think it's amazing and really important to pass on to children to give back to the community so that really makes me feel good. It's a great initiative. It hits you hard that there are hungry children in South Florida because you do not really fathom

that it's actually happening out there in our community. We feel really good about giving back to the children."

DePlaza, who has spent 32 years with GL Homes, was joined by her husband during the Summer of Service event. They teamed up to create lunch packages as she scooped the chicken and he made the wraps. She said they both enjoyed volunteering and were able to create a well-balanced meal, which sets a great example for children to make healthy food choices when they get the opportunity. She also said she enjoyed spending time with other colleagues.

"We work collaboratively at GL Homes and that is the culture of the company," she said. "It moves from building a home, to giving back to the community and working with all different departments. It's another opportunity for us to interact with employees in a collaborative effort. I love to see people that I would not normally see at the corporate office everyday. The company feels really good about giving back."

Susan Taves is the director of culinary services at Feeding South Florida. They utilize a large and spacious kitchen where they cook and freeze meals at their location in Boynton Beach. The trained chef is joined by other full-time employees and typically 20 volunteers to prepare and pack-

age meals for immobile seniors throughout the year. She said the initial goal last year with a smaller staff was to create 6,000 meals each month for seniors. They have increased their goal from between 10,000 to 15,000 meals each month this year with additional employees and volunteers. They package 10 meals in a box each time in order to provide two weeks of meals for seniors. They focus on creating well-balanced meals without sugar, with low sodium and more calories included.

Feeding South Florida also launched an after-school food service program this past spring for the first time, which included snacks and dinner packages for children. They will continue with the program for the upcoming school year, which will begin in August.

Taves said the organization's summer food service program has been successful with the assistance of volunteers. The program is designed to help children who have depended on meals at school and who do not have the resources for meals in the summer months. She said the goal is to provide two meals each day for up to 600 children in need. The breakfast packages include cereal and fruit while lunch packages consist of wraps, bento boxes and other well-balanced meals.

"GL homes is a great supporter," she said. "We rely on them and they work really hard when they are here. They are the backbone of our operation."

Sarah Alsofrom, GL Homes director of community relations, said the GL Summer of Service program is statewide. They prepared meals in Naples for St. Matthew's House to assist in the fight against hunger and homelessness. GL Homes also will have a group of volunteers join the Boys & Girls Clubs of Palm Beach County for a backpack stuffing event this summer for children in need who are heading back to school in August.

Alsofrom said several organizations may place an age restriction on volunteers, but Feeding South Florida provides opportunities for both children and teens to volunteer and receive community service hours.

"Feeding South Florida is a great avenue for parents to be able to send their kids in a safe environment, keep them busy and productive and to appreciate their good fortune by making meals for people who don't have enough to eat," she said. "It's a great opportunity for young people who need those community service hours and to be able to give back and feel good about what you're doing. It's a fabulous place to volunteer."

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