

Plans underway for Cynthia Saben's 5th annual Breakfast In The Park

BY MARY WANSEER
Resident Community News

Cynthia Saben's plans are underway for her 5th annual Breakfast In The Park. She needs volunteers and donors as she prepares for Christmas morning 2022 at New Dawn Outreach Center on Duval Street.

In November 2018, Cynthia had an idea. She was going to wake up on Christmas morning, cook up some biscuits and gravy in her kitchen, pack a few containers of orange juice in her trunk, and head to Main Street Park to distribute the goods to folks she had noticed lingering there. Cynthia mentioned her idea to a friend at work who agreed to help. Their discussions led to an expanded menu to include eggs and coffee. "You tell God your plan, and He'll get a good laugh," Cynthia said. They estimated they'd need enough to feed 50 people, so they requested volunteers and donations via Facebook. Cynthia swears she heard angels whispering to her, "Get more eggs. Get more eggs." She's grateful she did, as the final headcount reached 325 people who ate that morning. Cynthia knew she'd do it again the following year.

By Christmas 2019, the Main Street Park had become a dog park, no longer an ideal location for serving breakfast. Cynthia moved the operation to Spring Park. It proved too far a walk for many of the folks in need, and the headcount dropped to under 200. So, after the lines dwindled, Cynthia and some volunteers hand-delivered boxed breakfasts to people

on the streets. This practice would continue through the next several Christmases and include serving residents at Cathedral Towers, an affordable housing apartment complex.

The next year, 2020, Cynthia contacted New Dawn Outreach Center for permission to serve Christmas breakfast in their parking lot near the corner of Liberty and Ashley Streets, though the operation would retain its original name, Breakfast In The Park. "That began a new partnership," Cynthia said. Christmas breakfast was served there the following year as well, in 2021, and they plan to continue this year at New Dawn's new location at 225 East Duval Street. "We're so excited because that gets us closer to where we were the first year," Cynthia said. It's nearer to what she calls "the hub" of where there is a high concentration of homeless people in need of a hot meal.

Cynthia's goal this year is to feed 350-400 Christmas breakfasts. Her dream is to find a company that will lend her chairs and tables to seat her "guests" so that they needn't sit on curbs to eat. She's fine with serving breakfast outside because many of those who come are wheelchair users who would have staircase and doorway issues for an indoor location and because many have emotional dispositions that might make them feel unsafe in a confined space. "Every safety precaution we can think of, we're on top of," Cynthia said.

Breakfast In The Park has not come without its challenges. In 2020 and 2021, Cynthia had to cap the number of volunteers who could help and the number of meals served due to pandemic fears and restrictions. She has had to secure permits when gathering in the parks. Every year, she purchases a daily insurance

policy. This year, the cost of food due to economic inflation is a concern. Equipment has to be planned for, too, not only food. Some of the equipment that Cynthia and her team use every year is borrowed. Some pieces she was able to buy with donations. Others she has purchased herself just because there was a desperate need—like the griddle, for example, which she purchased new because their previous one had rusted.

Cynthia is insistent that the Christmas breakfasts be hearty. "We scramble real eggs on site, not powdered. The food is not plated up beforehand. I want it to be fresh," she said. They serve sausage, gravy over biscuits, and fruit cups. Danish and bread donations come from a local supermarket.

Cynthia's Christmas breakfast is not only about food and beverages. The parking lot is set up with various stations that guests visit. In addition to the food and drink areas, there's a prayer tent and an animal rescue stop. And it wouldn't be Christmas without presents, so there are nylon drawstring care bags that are packed in advance in volunteers' garages or on Cynthia's patio so that guests have gifts to take with them as they leave the breakfast line. The bags include essential toiletries, feminine products, underclothes, water bottles, snacks, and such—all depending upon what's donated ahead of time.

What Cynthia had planned to do by herself, set up one little canopy tent alone, expanded to include one friend assisting her. Over the past five years, the operation has grown to having an entire team of 50 or more volunteers and a multitude of generous donors, all of them reaching out to make Christmas morning a whole lot warmer for hundreds of Jacksonville



Brian Regnier, Cynthia Saben, Lora Weeks, and Winston Regnier



Breakfast In The Park 2020



Cynthia Saben with Breakfast In The Park guests

residents. Cynthia knows she cannot do this alone. She needs the community's help. "I do not want anyone turned away hungry or without something to take with them," she said.

To get involved, visit the Breakfast In The Park Facebook page. Listed there are particular items needed in addition to funds and gift cards. Cynthia uses that page as well as word of mouth to plan ahead of December 25. She asks that you please get in touch.

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