

## Fight against hunger bears fruit

By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

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THE BIG PICK--Zev Fegan, 8, of Encino helps pick oranges to be delivered to Jewish Family Service at a private orchard in Chatsworth Sunday. Volunteers picked about 200 boxes of oranges which will be distributed to the JFS food pantry. (Photo by David Crane/Staff Photographer)

**CHATSWORTH** - The gates of a four-acre estate opened for 60 volunteers, where they worked on a sun-drenched hillside Sunday to pick four tons of oranges to feed the hungry.

The first "Big Pick" was held at the Chatsworth estate owned by Russ Lyon and Grant Gochin, who invited the volunteers and officials from SOVA Community Food & Resource Program to pick oranges off 350 orange trees.

Organizers hope the idea will blossom.

"We are hoping, depending on how fast the fruit trees produce, to maybe do this twice a year and just help a lot of needy people," said Lyon, the 46-year-old co-owner of Chatsworth-based Travel, Events and Motivation promotions agency.

"We've had a fantastic turnout and we're really happy that everyone is here," he said. "And we just found out one of our volunteers may have access to a family that might let us pick avocados at their home."

The volunteers ranged from psychologists, artists, public relations professionals, bankers, and teachers among others.

"I thought it was an important way to give back to the community, especially with the economic situation in L.A.," said West Los Angeles resident Aldo Cos, a 48-year-old schoolteacher. "I felt a couple hours of my time was well worth volunteering for a good cause."

The oranges will be distributed at the agency's three food pantries in Van Nuys, Hollywood and West Los Angeles over the next two weeks, said Fred Summers, the operations manager for SOVA, which is part of Jewish Family Services of Los Angeles. The agency provides food to about 7,000 families each month and has been running low on fruits and vegetables.

"The clients we see are people living in poverty, and it is not just that they have a shortage of food, but oftentimes what they are able to afford

is not highly nutritious," Summers said.

He said he hopes other people open up their backyards to allow volunteers to "glean" excess fruit from trees in their backyards to feed the hungry.

In "Southern California - if you count all the backyards, there are just tens of thousands of tons of fruit out there," Summers said. "I'm sure some goes to waste here that could easily be distributed to people who could use it."

The idea for the "Big Pick" came to Valley Glen resident Rick Nahmias a couple of months ago. The 43-year-old photographer, who recently authored a book on migrant farm workers called "The Migrant Project," contacted Summers to see if SOVA was interested.

"I'm a Valley boy and I grew up around citrus trees," Nahmias said. "I never saw this as a potential place to get involved, but the truth is every day I walk my dog and as the season comes I see these trees laden with fruit. Maybe 90 percent ends up on the ground. I do a lot of work in the food world and around migrant food workers. I'm very plugged in to the waste that is going on."

The volunteers spent two or three hours picking fruit and come away feeling like they were involved in something special, Nahmias said.

"The people who own the homes get their fruit trees unloaded for free," Nahmias said. "The trees are made a little healthier in the process."

The effort to bring fresh food to the hungry and those in need comes as SOVA has experienced a 43 percent increase in the number of people going to its food pantries from January 2008 to January 2009. The number of people SOVA is feeding has risen from less than 5,000 to more than 7,000.

"Everything is stretched thin," said Nancy Volpert, director of public policy for Jewish Family Services. "We are finding ourselves in a position of having to buy more food than we ever used to."

Volpert said the agency used to rely more on food distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to regional pantries and drives. But as demand increased, SOVA has had to purchase more food.

Encino resident Lisa Lainer-Fagen and her daughter, Sara Fagen, 6, were among those using fruit pickers to pluck the oranges off the trees.

Sara spun around underneath the trees in awe of the natural beauty of an orange grove.

"Mommy, look at how many oranges we got," Sara said. "The orange right there looks juicy."

Anyone who would like to volunteer to pick fruit or open their backyards to SOVA volunteers is asked to call 818-988-7682, or e-mail Summers at [fsummers@jfsla.org](mailto:fsummers@jfsla.org).