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The Produce Queen

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CONCERN FOR SENIORS**

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COVER STORY

{by karen werner}

The Produce Queen

DIANA GREGORY PACKS A GENUINE CONCERN FOR SENIORS

It's a Friday morning and Diana Gregory has been up for hours, coordinating delivery logistics for hundreds of pounds of produce. She oversees 40 volunteers as they arrange bright yellow boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables along a long row of tables at the Veteran's Administration Medical Center on 7th Street and Indian School Road.

Gregory, a retired sales executive for Anheuser-Busch, uses her merchandising acumen to

create an attractive display that functions well. She splits the row of tables into two, so that two lines of shoppers can browse at the same time, avoiding bottlenecks.

She inspects the produce, pulling a bruised tomato from the pile, and prepares to greet her guests. With support from ONECare by Care1st Health Plan Arizona, Inc., Gregory and her volunteers will be giving 500 Valley veterans the chance to eat a

healthy meal by handing out bags of fresh produce in honor of Memorial Day.

“Thank you for your service!” Gregory calls out with high energy and a genuine smile.

But Gregory offers more than friendly greetings. The food, knowledge and community she provides are helping to save lives. Gregory’s Fresh Market, the mobile produce market she started in 2009, brings farmers markets to senior and veteran facilities, making it easy for them to shop for healthy foods.

reasons for donating their time — but all cite Gregory’s heartfelt passion for the mission as a primary cause.

It was the summer of 1964 when Gregory’s dedication to seniors began. She was an 8-year-old girl playing with friends when she noticed that her 85-year-old neighbor, Ms. Fannie, needed help. Ms. Fannie had taken two buses to the grocery store and needed assistance hauling her groceries up the eight flights of stairs back to her apartment. So Gregory stopped playing games to make Ms. Fannie’s life a little easier.

Gregory didn’t know it at the time but Ms. Fannie lived in a “food desert” and had limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Today, more than 50 years later, this problem has not gone away. So Gregory has made it her mission to supply healthy foods to older adults like Ms. Fannie, a group that has limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables — and respect.

In Maricopa County, adults over 65 experience high levels of poverty, which has a direct impact on their health and well-being. “One out of seven seniors in Arizona goes to bed hungry because they have to choose between food and medication,” Gregory

said. “Most of those seniors live in food desert areas and they live on a fixed income of less than \$700 a month. By the end of the month, many of them don’t have money to buy food.”

With little money and limited resources, Gregory’s clients often lack the support and services needed to obtain fresh, healthy foods. “Most of the people we serve are seniors. They’re on walkers and scooters. They’re in wheelchairs. So they can’t get out to go to the grocery store,” Gregory said. “We thought the best way to help them would be to bring a mobile market with fresh fruits and vegetables to where they are.”

In doing this, Gregory discovered that she

“One out of seven seniors in Arizona goes to bed hungry because they have to choose between food and medication.”

— Diana Gregory

Gregory and a group of volunteers travel throughout the Valley on a mission to enrich lives through healthy eating — they provided more than 100,000 pounds of fresh produce to over 7,500 low-income and underserved seniors in Maricopa County last year. Committed to the cause, Gregory and all of her volunteers work for free.

“I met her on the golf course and she was talking about doing something after retiring. I told her I’d volunteer until she got it going, and I’m still volunteering,” said Rufus McClain, an eight-year veteran with the organization.

Gregory has never had a problem getting volunteers. They offer multiple



Fresh Express

These are the programs and services Diana Gregory Outreach Services provides:

NOURISHING SENIORS

offers interactive workshops that teach healthy eating and lifestyles

VEGGIES FOR VETERANS

provides homeless veterans with access to fresh fruits, vegetables and nutrition education

HEALTHY COOKING CLASSES

works with nutritionists and nutrition experts to offer healthy cooking classes

GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

helps grandparents stay healthy as they raise grandkids

NOURISHING GRANDKIDS

teaches children healthy eating and cooking

GIFT OF NUTRITION

gives more than 2,000 seniors bags of fresh produce during the holidays



Veg Love

Diana Gregory shares produce tips:

STORE POTATOES with an apple to keep them from sprouting. Your potatoes will last longer.

WATERMELON JUICE is refreshing on a hot day, keeps the heart healthy and is easy to juice. Just slice a cold watermelon and remove the rind and seeds. Put a small amount of water in a blender to cover the bottom and add the watermelon slices. Puree for 60 seconds, depending on the number of slices, then drink and enjoy.

GINGER is filled with antioxidants and boosts the immune system, but it can quickly dry out. To preserve fresh ginger, peel off the skin, cut in small pieces and freeze until needed. It lasts frozen for at least three months.

PUT OFF BY THE TEXTURE OF RAW KALE? Give it a rubdown! When you massage kale, it breaks down the toughness and releases a sweetness in the leaves. After removing the leafy kale from the stem, place the leaves in a large bowl and top with a little olive oil. Gently knead the leaves for a couple of minutes until the texture is soft.



COVER STORY CONTINUED

could attack multiple problems. Today, Diana Gregory Outreach Services runs several programs that work together to eliminate health disparities in under-resourced communities.

Her flagship “Nourishing Seniors” program delivers fresh, quality produce to older adults in independent senior residences and care facilities. By setting up farmers markets where they live, Gregory provides opportunities for seniors to make their own food selections while eliminating barriers such as transportation or navigating bad weather. “There’s a sense of pride about being able to shop for yourself, being independent,” Gregory said.

In addition to the produce, the seniors receive wellness information, health screenings and take healthy cooking classes. “We try to have her here monthly, usually the first or second week of the month, because our residents are on a very modest income and that’s when they usually have money to get their produce,” said Angela Banks, service coordinator at Tanner Terrace apartments, which provides affordable housing for seniors. “The residents love it.”

Banks says it’s easy for residents to come downstairs to shop, but she noticed something remarkable that came along with these trips. “They started socializing and building unity with that, so we started introducing nutrition classes. From there, we expanded into voter registration and building advocacy behind their nutrition,” she said.

“I’ve seen our people improving their health,” said Lou Woody, a Tanner Terrace resident. Woody used to own a restaurant but found herself cooking less and less over the years. Thanks to Gregory’s Fresh Market, she’s cooking again. “I buy a lot of vegetables. I buy their tomatoes, zucchini, broccoli. I’ll use it to have fresh vegetables or I make soup,” she said. “It’s really improved my health and nutrition.”

That’s music to Angela Banks’s ears. “If you can cook, cook! We don’t want you to just get Meals on Wheels and have these services disable you,” she said.

Gregory’s Fresh Market also runs “Veggies for Veterans,” which targets Maricopa

We saw an opportunity while they’re there with their grandparents to teach them life skills.

— Diana Gregory, on the Nourishing Grandkids program

County veterans living in poverty. “A lot of veterans, especially homeless veterans, have diabetes and hypertension,” Gregory said. She is attempting to combat that with fruits, vegetables and nutrition information.

At the Veteran’s Administration event, Willy Jones, an Army veteran who served in Vietnam, selects cabbage, celery, tomatoes, onions, grapes, strawberries, apples and bananas. “It’s good for you! My wife is gonna cook the cabbage up,” he said. “This is a nice program. It helps the veterans out and gives something back.”

Another program Gregory’s Fresh Market offers is “Nourishing Grandkids,” an intergenerational project that supports grandparents who are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. In Maricopa County, this growing population consists of nearly 9,000 seniors over 65 who are caring for one of more grandchildren — many on a permanent basis.

Children are an important part of this program and are encouraged to participate in all of the activities. “The kids get so involved that they wanted to start doing the cooking. So we got them all little aprons,” Gregory said. “We saw an opportunity while they’re there with

COVER STORY CONTINUED

their grandparents to teach them life skills.”

This can-do spirit has been key to Gregory’s success. Raised in the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis, Missouri, she graduated as valedictorian of her high school class and won a scholarship to Boston University. After graduation, she had a successful 30-year career at Anheuser-Busch and always knew that she wanted to give back after retiring. “All those skills that I learned in corporate America, I was able to apply to running my own nonprofit organization — marketing, communications, brand management, merchandising and how

around the farmers market. So it’s just the platform that we use to get them here.”

At Tanner Terrace, the residents are building community out of it. “When they come and there’s not a speaker, they know what to do,” Banks said. “They talk, they chat. So it has taken on its own life.”

If produce is the main ingredient Gregory’s Fresh Market serves, the volunteers are the secret sauce. They genuinely care about their customers and greet them with smiles and hugs. “Relating to them is so important,” said Pete Weston, a volunteer

for six years. “Sometimes just a smile, just knowing their name and them knowing your name. When they come up and hug you it’s a worthwhile feeling.”

Rufus McClain agrees. “They come down and socialize, and you can tell that they don’t do anything else during the day. This is the area for them to greet and meet one another. They like to laugh and have someone to laugh at, and I’m good at that,” he said.

True to form, McClain playfully teases Tanner Terrace resident Lou Woody when she enters the room. “When we get our age, we miss that with our families. This fills a void to go

socialize,” she said. “There’s a lot more than just coming down for the vegetables.”

In the course of their service, the volunteers form real relationships. “I’ve had volunteers come a week later and say, ‘Your resident was looking to get some greens and we didn’t have them, but now we’re here to deliver them,’” Banks said.

Such service is no accident. “Most farmers markets are more transactional. With us, it’s all about building the relationship,” Gregory explained. “We stay in touch



to bring a product to the people,” she said.

Her father’s health challenges provided inspiration. Diagnosed with both colon cancer and prostate cancer, he began eating raw and vegetarian foods to regain his health. “I saw firsthand how diet can make a difference,” Gregory said. “It actually helped heal my father.”

Today, her farmers market is a platform to create healthy change. “The other piece is the socialization factor,” Gregory said. “We do healthy cooking classes, nutrition education, voter registration and fitness education

with them. They become like family. Sometimes we may be their only family.”

The community has taken note of the impact Diana Gregory is making. She received the 2017 Experience Matters Encore Impact Award; the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Living the Dream Award from the City of Phoenix; and the Small Business of the Year Award from the Arizona Black Chamber of Commerce, among others. BHHS Legacy Foundation was so impressed by the organization’s work, it presented Gregory with a refrigerated van earlier this year to help her deliver fruits and vegetables.

“I think we’ve changed a few lives with the nutritional programs,” McClain said. “People come down to that cooking program and say, ‘I didn’t know things could be so easy and taste so good.’”

Senior citizens themselves, Weston and McClain have learned a few things while volunteering. “I’ve learned the nutritional values of different things. Go to that little bag in the corner and you’ll see one stem of kale and some apples that I’m going to juice,” Weston said.

Tales of improved health abound. One customer lost 100 pounds; others have lowered their cholesterol. “We’ve had some that were taking over 20 medications and are now taking just four,” Gregory said.

It’s all part of her plan to enrich the lives of older adults in Arizona, one meal at a time.

Back at the VA Medical Center, Gregory has served hundreds of veterans before noon. “These are people that have served our country. And it touches my heart where we want to do more,” she said. “We owe it to them to pay it forward.”

Frontdoors editor Karen Werner is a writer, editor and media consultant. She has interned at The New Yorker, worked at Parents Magazine, edited five books and founded several local magazines. Her work has appeared in Sunset, Mental Floss and the Saturday Evening Post.



Want to Help?

More than 100,000 older adults in Maricopa County are living below the poverty level and face significant barriers to accessing fresh, healthy food. To help close the gap, donate to Gregory’s Fresh Market by visiting dianagregory.com or using the United Way designated write-in number, 27-1030793.

