

One friendly fridge

Carver Center teams up with Westchester students to install a community refrigerator

By John Donegan

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The Friendly Fridge is the newest addition to the Carver Center located at 400 Westchester Ave. The community refrigerator is stocked with perishables such as milk, eggs, butter and bread, all of which is available to anyone who needs them, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Courtesy of Charlie Hirschhorn

As COVID-19 restrictions continue to ease, many families across the state and country are still reeling from the resulting economic recession. And while job reports show the economy is rebounding, many still struggle to provide food for themselves. Governments on all levels have implemented ways to combat food insecurity, but that shouldn't stop locals from taking action, too.

If you ask Charlie Hirschhorn, a rising high school junior from Scarsdale, equal access to food is a community's responsibility. In the short span of his life, it's also become his personal responsibility.

"From a very young age, I've been involved with food insecurity and giving back," Hirschhorn said. "Food insecurity is just one of the things I've felt very passionate about giving back to."

Hirschhorn and some of his friends, three students from Blind Brook High School, set up a community fridge right outside the Carver Center in Port Chester on June 21.

Hirschhorn attributes his food altruism to childhood experiences volunteering at the Don Bosco Community Center in Port Chester with his mother, Amy Hirschhorn. The difference now is that he doesn't do this for community service hours to graduate high school or out of some obligation from his parents or church. No one forced him to do this. Hirschhorn is simply making the change he wants to see in the world.

"This fridge is something I can spend my time doing and it feels really awesome and rewarding because it's finally a project that I'm leading and that makes it all the more rewarding," he said.

Hirschhorn got the idea to do a community fridge after seeing an article in the *New York Times*. The concept is popular in major cities, especially in Brooklyn, where Hirschhorn and a family friend installed his first refrigerator in November.

"The community fridge just seems like the perfect combination of giving back and helping people support their families," Hirschhorn said. "Nobody should have to go without food."

Hirschhorn, his mother and his friend Ryan Frieman, a rising sophomore at Blind Brook High School, as well as Blind Brook rising juniors Jordan and Alexa Hoberman, came up with the idea to bring the next community refrigerator to Port Chester.

They bought the fridge from a friend on Facebook Marketplace with grant money he applied for in April and received through Riley's Way Foundation, a local nonprofit, in June. Since they weren't a legitimate nonprofit, Hirschhorn directed the \$3,000 grant to Freedge, which is part of the California-based nonprofit Left-Lovers, who vouched for them as their fiscal sponsor, and from there they purchased the fridge. The group brainstormed potential locations before deciding to reach out to Mike Williams, the logistics coordinator at the 400 Westchester Ave. Carver Center.

The group also started the Friendly Fridge Network, a small but budding network of community refrigerators that Hirschhorn hopes to install in communities across the state. He hopes the group will eventually achieve a nonprofit status, all the while maintaining a teenaged leadership.

The fridges are stocked and maintained by volunteers. The Port Chester fridge, in its brief time operating, has enlisted the Hirschhorn family, the Frieman family, the Hoberman family and eight others to help. Volunteers can sign up through a Google form they set up online.

These volunteers currently stock it once a week. During their shift, they check the fridge and see what it needs before making purchases. They accept food donations but also have a GoFundMe page, The Port Chester Friendly Fridge, set up for grocery fees.

"They'll then go to the grocery store and grab a couple bags worth," Hirschhorn said. "I think here in Port Chester, our volunteers like to go a little overboard, and it's probably just because we're just starting the fridge, but it's been awesome and stocked all the way up."

There's no set time for shifts or requirements for what has to be available in the fridge; it's all run on a policy of good faith, much like its policy on what people can take or leave.

"The big part of the community fridge is that anybody can come and take anything, or anybody can come and leave anything," Hirschhorn said. "We'll take anything that looks good and isn't expired—like the home-cooked meals are great, as long as you put a date on them."

The Carver Center encourages all types of donations, sans food that's already expired. No one keeps watch over the fridge, so those who take from it don't feel ridiculed or judged.

"Our goal with the fridge is to make a no judgment zone where anybody can come in without feeling embarrassed," Hirschhorn said. "We don't want people to be scared of coming to the fridge because they don't want to be stared at by everybody and they don't want everybody to know necessarily that they can't support their family in that way."

Williams said the fridge complements the Center Market and offers a subtler system for those embarrassed to get in line.

"When people come to the market on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, we're giving them shelf-life stuff—rice pasta, sauce—and what the fridge offers them is a chance to go around and grab perishable items like meat, pizza, bagels, waffles," Williams said. "It's also good for people who might not want to get in line. They can head to the fridge on their time since it's open 24 hours a day. It gives people that choice which is what we're trying to accomplish."

While Hirschhorn is a Scarsdale resident, he didn't think a community fridge there would be as impactful as one in Port Chester, where income disparity is far more rampant.

"The problem is, I hate to say it, but in Scarsdale there's nowhere that this fridge would fit," Hirschhorn said. "In Port Chester, you have the mixing of the two communities and Scarsdale is close enough that it feels a part of our community, too."

For more information about the fridge, go to their Instagram [@thepcfriendlyfridge](#) or email them at thepcfriendlyfridge@gmail.com.