

Sprouts Market opens to big crowds, happy shoppers

By JOHN DUGAN

Sunnyvale shoppers were introduced recently to the newest competitor in the natural-foods market, and if early returns can be trusted, it could be a fruitful relationship.

Sprouts Farmers Market, a grocery chain specializing in natural, healthy low-cost foods, opened its first Northern California location on June 2 in Sunnyvale to massive crowds, as close to 4,000 customers passed through for the store's grand opening. The store offered free reusable grocery bags, coupons for free sandwiches and a plethora of special sales on its first day of business, and shoppers braved checkout lines 30 people deep to take advantage.

"Besides the mass hysteria and crowds, it was a good experience," said Sunnyvale resident

Lisa Flores. "The produce is excellent and the staff is very nice. I found everything I needed, even some stuff while I was in line to leave."

The Sunnyvale Sprouts location is the Phoenix-based company's 50th store, but the first in Northern California. It moved in to the former Circuit City big-box location at 111 E. El Camino Real, a 32,000-square-foot space that ranks as one of Sprouts' largest operations.

"We spent a lot of time scouting where we wanted our first store in Northern California, and Sunnyvale really fit all our criteria," said Doug Sanders, Sprouts President and Chief Operating Officer. "It's centrally located, the customer base is exactly who we are looking to serve, and there is a need for what we offer."

Sprouts' calling cards are its

fresh produce, massive bulk food selection and brand-name natural foods, of which the company offers more than 2,500 varieties. The store is also committed to maintaining rock-bottom prices, as evidenced in its company motto, "Healthy living for less."

On top of its everyday prices—which include avocados for 50 cents apiece and a dozen grade-A eggs for \$3—Sprouts was offering huge opening-day discounts. A gallon of apple juice was \$1, boxes of cereal were marked down to \$1 and fresh fish was on sale for \$5 a pound.

The Sunnyvale store also offers products aimed directly at the local customer base. Chinese okra, Japanese eggplant and an entire aisle of Indian foods, among other goods, are stocked to cater the large Asian and In-

dian populations in the area.

"We were just looking around at what they had and picking up a few things," said San Jose resident Gene Plonka, whose mother lives one block from the Sprouts location. "We wanted to get the lay of the land. We'll definitely be back."

Sprouts has opened 37 new stores in California, Arizona, Texas and Colorado in the past five years, with plans to open another dozen in 2011. Sanders said the company is planning at least two new stores in Northern California.

"In this market, our model is perfect," Sanders said. "People want healthy food, and they don't want to spend a ton to get it. We offer something they can't get many other places."

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JACQUELINE RAMSEYER

Parking spaces and carts were hard to come by, and the aisles were packed with customers on the grand opening day of Sprouts Farmers Market in Sunnyvale on June 2.

Rotating shelter program faces budget ax

By MATT WILSON

For nearly 20 years, the Faith in Action board and West Valley Community Services have worked hand in hand to help homeless men in need find monthly shelter in local houses of worship.

On May 27, the board received a CREST (Cupertino Recognizes Extra Steps Taken) Award from the city of Cupertino for the extra steps its volunteer members have taken over the years to help those men.

However, come July that rotating shelter program could end as the nonprofit West Valley Community Services faces unprecedented budget cuts from the city of San Jose and Santa Clara County.

"I take the words 'Love your neighbor as yourself' very seriously, as do all the Faith in Action members," said longtime board member Mary Ellen Hennig. "Every one of us in Faith in Action will say that we've received more than we've given. I have been continually astounded by the generosity, ingenious planning and hard work of everyone on the Faith in Action board. We spur one another on to continue and to grow."

Faith in Action organizes the

monthly transition of a rotating shelter between 11 local churches and one synagogue, which open up their doors to house homeless men. The shelter moves to a different site each month. Members of the congregations and local community groups such as Rotary, Kiwanis and various local restaurants take turns contributing meals.

The program serves about 200 to 250 men every year. In 2009, the rotating shelter provided 16,200 meals, 5,400 nightly beds for more than 100 homeless men and was supported by more than 3,285 volunteer hours, according to WVCS.

"For many of those men, it was truly a lifeline when they were at the end of their rope," Hennig said.

The city of San Jose, which traditionally provides a large portion of the funding for WVCS, has to close an estimated \$116 million shortfall in the city's general fund budget. WVCS is expecting about a \$150,000 total drop in funding as a result of budget cuts from San Jose and Santa Clara County.

"That would spell the end of the rotating shelter program," said Hennig.

The ongoing passion of the volunteers is assured, but WVCS provides the administrative and

professional side of the shelter program, said executive director Naomi Nakano-Matsumoto.

Shelter applicants are carefully screened and sign a contract which defines their responsibilities and rights within the program. Case workers provided by WVCS counsel each guest in preparing resumes and job searching. The nonprofit also provides a paid overnight supervisor, who is able to work closely with each guest on a daily basis. Other WVCS provided services include bus passes and passes to the local YMCA for showers.

"We need that professional expertise to do the intake and assessment of each man so we know that they're not coming in with a violent history and that they do not have sexual offenses," Nakano-Matsumoto said.

She estimates that shelter graduates get back on their feet 80 percent of the time, due to the success of the program and the behind the scenes work of the case workers.

"It would really be a shame if we lost the administrative side of the program. It would be kind of like turning off the light for having people involved in this," said Cathy Edwards a longtime board volunteer and now coordinator for Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church, which hosts the

men in April. "It's hard to really imagine losing [WVCS] because we would then have to become a social service agency instead of a collaboration of churches, and that sadly is just not what we are."

WVCS is expecting to hear its budgetary fate by June 30. The nonprofit serves Cupertino, Los Gatos, Monte Sereno, Saratoga, West San Jose and some unincorporated areas.

"We are working toward the

best-case scenario, though we have to plan for the worst. We are working for a positive outcome so we can provide the services that are vital and crucial," Nakano-Matsumoto said.

CREST AWARD Winners

Lynne Capener is the volunteer chairperson of the Cupertino Schools Disaster Preparedness Committee. She also works as a music teacher for Cupertino Union School District, is a graduate of the Community Emergency Response Team and a member of the Cupertino Amateur Radio Emergency Service.

Catherine Chen assembles packages for the military in Iraq with a class of students at Monta Vista High School, toiletries and other gifts for women and their daughters in a battered women's shelter during the holidays and annually assembles spring baskets for children for West Valley Community Services.

Cupertino Senior Desk Volunteers were recognized for their service, which includes registering seniors for membership, classes, trips, lunches and special events. They also give senior center tours, show people to their classrooms, keep up with class counts

and work with staff.

Wallace Iimura has volunteered more than 10 years at West Valley Community Services. Iimura is mostly an IT volunteer and played a major role in bringing the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program to WVCS.

The Operation Awareness Planning Team received an award for developing a citywide earthquake exercise to test the abilities of Cupertino local volunteers.

The Rhythmaires Band is an all-volunteer senior band originally from the Cupertino Senior Center that shares their music with senior centers, retirement residences, convalescent hospitals and local school districts. The band members volunteer an estimated 1,708 volunteer hours combined.

Isabel Rodriguez and Andy Huang played roles in the October 2009 Cupertino Emergency

Response Team emergency preparedness drill. Both Isabel and Andy each logged over 500 volunteer hours over a four-month period.

Susan and David Wong are members of the West Valley Community Services board of directors. They have been advocates for low-income families in the West Valley region and are also members of the Faith in Action board.

Crystal Yan started a service group at Lawson Middle School where she recruited more than 80 members. The members quickly raised \$1,500 to buy Thanksgiving dinners for low-income families and more than \$500 for UNICEF. Crystal also started Project Connecting Communities which helps local Fremont Union High School District students start their own service projects.