

One family's weekly trips to fill Chicago's Love Fridges are a reminder of our capacity to care for one another

By HEIDI STEVENS, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, MAR 02, 2021



Annie Swingen, from left, her son, Ellis, 10, and her husband, Lee Swingen, fill a Love Fridge with food in Little Village on Feb. 27, 2021. Direct Effect Charities, founded by Michelle DiGiacomo, counts on volunteers to shop and fill the fridges around the city. The public is welcome to take and to contribute food. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

In normal times, Michelle DiGiacomo spends a lot of the year planning around Santa.

Direct Effect Charities, the nonprofit she founded with her husband, Paul Fitzgerald, began with a Letters to Santa program that DiGiacomo took over from the late Chicago Sun-Times writer Jeff Zaslow two decades ago.

DiGiacomo partners with Chicago Public Schools to collect letters from kids whose families can't afford to buy gifts at Christmas. She distributes the letters to some kindhearted helpers, who fan out across the city and shop for gifts, which the kids then receive at school.

The pandemic wreaked havoc on that tradition, obviously. Closed schools meant no place to collect the letters and no place to distribute the gifts. The principal at Blair Early Childhood Center, which primarily serves students with multiple disabilities, arranged a small, drive-through gift drive, DiGiacomo said, which her charity helped supply. But the program was, for all intents and purposes, paused by COVID-19.

It's one of this pandemic's cruelest twists: Even as our communities' needs are growing, many of our traditional ways of meeting them are roadblocked.

Undaunted, DiGiacomo [wrote a letter in October](#) inviting her loyal donors to purchase grocery store gift cards in lieu of gifts from Santa, which she pledged to hand out to school principals and otherwise use to fill the growing food insecurity caused by COVID-19 lockdowns and layoffs.

She said she collected around \$25,000 in gift cards.

“That’s when I found out about Love Fridge,” she told me.

Love Fridges are [community refrigerators](#) that dot Chicago neighborhoods, offering free, fresh food to anyone who needs it. The brainchild of Chicago musician Ramon “Radius” Norwood, Love Fridges started popping up around the city last summer, and now there are more than 20, from Avondale to Back of the Yards to Pilsen to Englewood. (Find one at thelovefridge.com/locations.)

DiGiacomo was immediately taken with the idea. But she’s disabled, and shopping for and filling the fridges herself was not an option. Her husband died of esophageal cancer in 2008. Her daughter, who grew up helping with Letters to Santa, moved to California for college.

So she posted a note on some neighborhood Facebook pages, asking if anyone would like to take a few thousand dollars in Jewel-Osco gift cards she’s collected and use them to fill Love Fridges.

“I needed someone to be my arms and legs,” she said.

Annie Swingen saw DiGiacomo’s post and jumped in to help, giving rise to one of the beautiful little villages of good that are punctuating this pandemic.

Swingen, her husband, Lee, and their 10-year-old son, Ellis, now have a weekly tradition. They collect coupons all week and hit Jewel by 7 a.m. Saturday. Each family member gets a list and a cart. Ellis is tasked with keeping them on budget. After they shop, they hit different Love Fridges around the city.

Swingen has learned a few things: Some Love Fridges have built-in pantries for nonperishable goods — bread, cereal, paper products. When she fills those shelves with tampons and pads, they’re often gone before she’s even back in her car. Meat and eggs go quickly too.

Invariably, Swingen comes across homemade soups and other meals in the fridges, which warms her heart a bit.

Some people donate food that’s expired, which Swingen removes.

“People are shopping, not foraging,” she said. “Preserving people’s dignity is really important to me.”

She sometimes finds grocery bags, unpacked, stuffed on the fridge or pantry shelves. She unpacks them and arranges the items so people can more easily see their choices.

“If folks can’t donate money or items, they can donate their time,” she said. “You can go once a week and check expiration dates, check if the fridges have been unplugged. There’s a very communal aspect to it.”

DiGiacomo, meanwhile, is continuing to collect money for more gift cards. (You can make a tax-deductible donation via Zelle at 312-296-5311 or Venmo [@direct-effect-charities](#).)

“I’m going to collect them until the need doesn’t exist,” she said. “People are hungry and people are hurting.”

And people, when and how they can, are finding ways to step up and help.

We're a year into this pandemic, and we've learned a lot — about viruses and vaccines, about the life span of respiratory droplets and the importance of masks, about our safety nets and their weak spots, about our fault lines and our ingenuity.

And we've learned, over and over, that humans have a tremendous capacity to take care of one another, in and around and beyond whatever obstacles life throws in our path. Let's hold onto that.

Join the [Heidi Stevens Balancing Act](#) Facebook group, where she continues the conversation around her columns and hosts occasional live chats.

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