‘They were terrified’
Dramatic Be Concerned mobilization eases pain of economy’s near shutdown

There was no mistaking what Andy Brunsman saw in the faces of the hundreds of people who flocked to Be Concerned in March seeking food for their families as the COVID-19 pandemic dawned in Northern Kentucky.

“They were terrified,” he said. “It was an overwhelming feeling. It was palpable. It was the look of people facing the choice of not eating or risking their lives to pick up food.”

Brunsman saw it again and again as he stalked the Be Concerned parking lot in Covington taking food orders in a new “car-hop” pantry model he devised to minimize personal contact between customers and those helping them. Shoppers stayed in their cars while he and a couple of others took food orders, which volunteers working inside the pantry filled and sent back out.

Covington Operations Director Dan Clifford worked inside, handling the steady stream of first-timers, many of them people whose jobs had evaporated as restaurants and other businesses were ordered to close to help contain the pandemic.

“It was a mix of people,” he said. “Some just saw on the news what we were doing, some had learned about us from their (case) workers. They were very appreciative, but also shocked and embarrassed to find themselves in such a situation.”

The drill was the same at Be Concerned’s Erlanger location. John Jenkins worked the parking lot taking orders and Erica Moreland and Margie Meehan filled them inside. Warehouse manager Bill Weber also pitched in.

Early on, Brunsman had ruled out the option of simply handing pre-packed food boxes to customers. That would have deprived them of the “choice” element that has been a hallmark of Be Concerned since it began distributing food in 1987, he said.

The only other choice was to close the agency.

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Massive HCFNK effort ensures food assistance for thousands

As it became apparent in March the threat the Coronavirus posed to the region, leaders of Horizon Community Funds of Northern Kentucky put together a plan to help those who would be most hurt in the emerging pandemic.

“We realized an immediate need to support nonprofits in areas that had the most impact on individuals and families’ needs to stay safe and healthy,” said Nancy Grayson, the organization’s president.

Thus was born the Horizon Coronavirus Relief Fund. The top priority in its first phase: food.

HCFNK asked Be Concerned Executive Continued on Page 4

Outing’s 1st presenting sponsor: ZoomEssence

Some details of the “how” for Be Concerned’s Golf Outing Sept. 10-11 at Twin Oaks Golf Club in Latonia remain unclear, but it’s already made history in a major -- and very positive -- way.

The event has its first ever presenting sponsor, one donating at least $10,000. Hebron-based ZoomEssence, which specializes in the design and manufacture of powdered flavors, committed to the sponsorship in March, just as the pandemic was surfacing locally.

ZoomEssence CEO Bob Corbett said his company was “thankful and humbled to support Be Concerned as the title sponsor” for the outing. And he encouraged other companies to aid Be Concerned’s efforts by participating in the outing, volunteering and supporting food drives.

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Twin Oaks’ wide open spaces will host Be Concerned’s outing for the 22nd straight year.

Andy Brunsman transfers food into the car of a customer, one of 1400 who came to Be Concerned in April seeking help.
‘Terrified’

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“And that wasn’t going to happen unless the governor ordered us to, or I got sick,” Brunsman said.

When the onslaught began March 16, he had already furloughed most of the agency’s volunteers for their own safety. That left staff and a handful of volunteers to wait on a relentless stream of customers, 60 to 80 families a day at Covington alone.

Keeping up was physically punishing, particularly for those patrolling the steeply sloped parking lot in Covington. “The first 2 weeks, I dropped 31 lbs. and got a severe case of shin splints,” Brunsman said.

Worse was the emotional toll. “There was no light at the end of the tunnel for our folks. We were giving them food. But what happens when the rent comes due?”

A far cry from the way Be Concerned had dispensed food for 33 years, the car-hop model seemed an over-reaction to some customers experiencing it for the first time, said Covington Warehouse Manager Zac Grawe. “But the longer it went on, people appreciated us more. They accepted the seriousness of the situation.”

Elsa Black’s family was among 1,400 who received food in April. She wasn’t new to Be Concerned — she’d gotten help from the pantry the agency had run at Mount St. Joseph University, where she was a student, since 2018. But that program closed when the school did in March, so she began coming to Covington.

The pandemichammered the Blacks in multiple ways. Elsa’s husband, Christopher, saw his hours at a Northern Kentucky warehouse cut back from 40 to 30.

With school closed down, the couple’s 10-year-old son, Taylen, no longer had access to food programs there.

So, Be Concerned was a great help to the Blacks. “We were definitely not prepared financially for what has happened,” Elsa said. “Be Concerned has given us things to stretch out our meals.”

And she’s used fruit snacks from Be Concerned as incentives for Taylen to bear down on his home-schooling.

Stories of desperation were common among the food-seekers. A woman from Grant County came with her dog and just enough gas for the round trip to Covington. But she went home happy, with food for the pooch and her family, Clifford said.

Besides feeding the people already in its programs and taking on hundreds of new families, Be Concerned found other ways to go above and beyond.

When it became apparent that Kentucky was about to shutter its public schools for the academic year, Be Concerned sent 3 months worth of food — instead of the usual 1 — home with students in its Weekend Project.

And when a temporary shelter for the homeless opened up in the Northern Kentucky Convention Center, Be Concerned sent 720 meals to help feed them.

So, it was no surprise that by the time March ended, the agency had fed a record 1,520 households.

The car-hop model gave way July 6th to the old, inside system both at Covington and Erlanger. It came with safety precautions. Masks required for everyone in the building. No more than 15 people in the lobby, in widely spaced chairs. Six feet of separation for all. Sanitizing carts and chairs after each use. One-third of previous customer capacity in the thrift stores.

It’s unclear how many of the volunteers helping before the pandemic struck will return this month. Some have said they’ll wait and see how it goes. “July is going to be an adventure,” Clifford predicted.

Brunsman credited all his life experiences for preparing him for the spring of 2020.

And God, for sending all the volunteers and material resources it took to get through those harrowing 4 months.

As dark and — yes, terrifying — as it was, it also may have been Be Concerned’s finest hour, he said. “With the pandemic came a great sense of unity. People were afraid, but not just for themselves. There was a sense of community that we were all in this together.”

When everyone else left, they stayed

In early March, Donna Roth and Sr. Mary Cashman were volunteers in Be Concerned’s Betty’s Treasures Thrift Store in Covington.

Then pandemic happened.

The store closed, Be Concerned sent most of its volunteers home, and its senior workers were ordered off the job by their employer, the Council on Aging.

But on March 16, Roth and Cashman showed up as usual at the agency — and were warmly welcomed. Suddenly, they’d become essential personnel.

Sr. Mary made a conscious decision that it was the place where she was most needed, and got approval from her congregation, the Sisters of Divine Providence in Melbourne.

Donna, a pantry customer since 2016 and a volunteer since 2018, is also Be Concerned’s neighbor. From her yard across the alley, she Continued on page 3
As need surges, so does support

March was a deeply dark time in Northern Kentucky as a stealthy, mysterious killer – the Coronavirus – stalked victims across the region.

But illuminating the darkness were points of light, people and organizations who stepped up to address the plight of thousands of folks suddenly jobless. For Be Concerned, those humanitarian gestures were vast and varying, from hand-sewn masks to $20,000 in drive-up checks.

Crossroads Church Florence did three huge drives that yielded not only food but paper and cleaning products, items nearly impossible to find in the early spring. 7 Hills Church sent 200 meal boxes and a pallet of baby formula. Fidelity repurposed the employee cafeteria at its Covington campus to turn out microwavable dinners and gave Be Concerned 500 a week.

JTM sent a pallet of meat, Perfetti Van Melle 12 pallets of candy, the USDA milk, the Freestore Foodbank 600 emergency food boxes.

The owner of an Ohio company delivered a $2,500 check every Monday for eight straight weeks. The Tom & Marie Schuh Family Fund, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, United Way of Greater Cincinnati and the Kentucky Colonels all made grants.

Some donations were personal. Christie Pavia and her sons, Mario, 6, and Davis, 5 did 3 food drives for Be Concerned: in their Crescent Springs neighborhood; at Crossroads, where they worship, and at St. Joseph Parish in Crescent Springs, where Mario is a student. The drives brought in 5,500 lbs. of food and $10,000 in donations.

And Christie’s husband, Mike, and his Crossroads Bible study group disinfected all the racks in the Covington pantry.

Some donors capitalized on their talents to benefit Be Concerned. Micaela Holbrook, owner of Scratch: Handcrafted Desserts, in Fort Wright, made a cake and raffled it off, raising $275.

Then something wonderful happened, a “contagious virus of people wanting to give more,” she said. Those on-line bidders pushed Micaela’s gift total to $2,000.

“We have hope and love and people willing to help those less fortunate,” she said. “It warms my heart and makes this crazy time in our lives feel more optimistic.”

Sheep Dog Impact Assistance, a volunteer group of former military and public safety workers, learned that an injury had sidelined one of the Be Concerned drivers who picks up food weekly from Kroger and other vendors. Sheep Dog members drove that routes for the next 3 months.

The outpouring of support enabled Be Concerned to set records for the number of people it helped, said Be Concerned Executive Director Andy Brunsman.

“It’s a reminder that we’re the People’s Pantry. Operated for, supported by and run by the people,” he said.

Two go from homeless to helpers

In the intrepid band of workers who helped Be Concerned feed more than 1,400 families this spring were 2 with a unique perspective on people in need.

Bruce Chenault and Tray Hubbard have been jobless and down and out often in the past decade. Indeed, both were homeless when COVID-19 hit in March.

They were housed with several hundred others in temporary quarters in a joint effort by Welcome House and the Emergency Shelter of Northern Kentucky when they learned of Be Concerned’s need. “I wanted to give back for the help I was getting,” said Bruce, 58, a Covington native who returned 3 years ago to track down his biological brothers, only to discover all 3 had died of drug overdoses.

Kenton County Judge-Executive Kris Knochelmann brokered a deal that paid the two for 18.5 hours a week for 8 weeks that ended June 26. Mostly, they ferried groceries from the Covington pantry to shoppers in the parking lot.

Tray, 48, a truck driver who’s lived in Covington for 30 years, said his stint at Be Concerned was rewarding. “I like to help people at a time like this when lots of places were closing,” he said. “It’s good someone’s still there for them.”

They stayed

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Bruce Chenault, left, and Tray Hubbard stock shelves in the Covington pantry.

Be Concerned Executive Director Andy Brunsman said that Bruce and Tray came along when needed most.

“They worked hard, had great attitudes and were people-oriented,” Brunsman said.

“Our, they had shared experiences with lots of our customers. They were a perfect fit for us.”
Finding food proves major challenge

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Director Andy Brunsman to find that food and design and implement a system to distribute it.

Brunsman agreed, even while realizing it would mean “taking a full-time job on top of a full-time job” — the one he had leading Be Concerned.

He was tasked with procuring food for Be Concerned and 18 other organizations that ministered to low-income residents of Northern Kentucky.

He succeeded. By the time the initiative wound down last month, it had fed 21,000 people in 8,000 households with $140,000 provided by Horizon.

But it wasn’t easy.

With the dawning of pandemic came a wave of panic buying, reducing the availability of many items that just weeks before had been plentiful. Supply chain disruptions related to the quarantine complicated the situation.

To make the situation even more challenging, about the time Brunsman began his search for product, billionaire philanthropists like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates started pumping money into efforts to help nonprofits nationwide.

That drove prices up. “Staples like corn and green beans and mac and cheese, suddenly the cost more than doubled,” Brunsman said.

He countered that with bulk buying, locking in prices for up to 10 weeks in advance.

Brunsman cast his net nearly from coast to coast to secure what local agencies needed. Three truckloads of produce shipped from California. Two semis full of chicken from Alabama. Atlantic Foods, a Cincinnati wholesaler, began buying directly for him.

Part of the Horizon funding was to pay 4 workers to move the food. But Brunsman thought he could get the job done with just 2 if he found the right hires.

Enter Jeff Conroy and Jake Hassert. “They were the Batman and Robin of the pandemic for us,” Brunsman said. “There was no way we could have accomplished what we did for Horizon without the massive amount of physical labor they did.”

The $15,000 Brunsman saved on labor went to buy more food.

Conroy said he was “proud of what Be Concerned more than justified the faith Horizon placed in him to lead the food initiative. “We knew he’d be able to deploy our funds with a deep understanding of his and his partners’ needs in Northern Kentucky,” she said. Unsurprisingly, he was able to leverage resources even more to get more resources for the participating groups.

Brunsman said he was “proud of what Be Concerned was able to do for the greater community” in the project.

“We want to be the agency people turn to for food,” he said.

Greenwood named 2020 ‘Heart’ winner

Fred Greenwood said it was “totally by accident” that he got involved with Be Concerned.

He was looking for a good place to volunteer after he and his family moved to Northern Kentucky. Be Concerned was looking for board members.

It was a match, and a great one at that. In the 20 years since, Fred has provided strong and steady leadership for the agency, especially in times when it was most needed.

That and his support in other ways big and small made him an easy choice for the 2020 Heart of Be Concerned Award, given annually to a person or organization who has provided “substantial and sustained support” to the agency. The award will be presented Sept. 11 at Be Concerned’s golf outing.

Fred moved to Northern Kentucky with his wife, Kathy, and their 3 daughters in 1999 when Ashland Inc., where he was a tax attorney, re-located from Ashland, KY., to the RiverCenter in Covington.

He began to look for opportunities to give back. A friend referred him to Be Concerned Board President Rob Hudson. Fred liked the organization’s emphasis on treating its customers with dignity and respect. He joined the board, and within a year became its treasurer. He’s now in his sixth board term.

As board president in 2016, Fred helped to lead the agency through a move from Washington Street to a renovated building at 1100 Pike St. in Covington. The move made way on Be Concerned’s old block for upscale apartments, boosting Covington’s urban core redevelopment effort. Be Concerned, meanwhile, wound up with a newer and more functional building that was valued at nearly $1 million and debt free.

Fred was still board president in 2018 when merger talks began with United Ministries, a food agency in Erlanger since 1983. In negotiations with UM before the deal became final, Fred said he realized the compliment that UM leaders paid to Be Concerned in seeking the deal. “Our reputation made them comfortable to approach us,” he said.

Be Concerned is still a big part of Fred’s life, he says, because of the simplicity and profundity of the work it does.

“We get food and we give it to people who need it,” he said. “You make a donation to Be Concerned and you know it’s going right into some-one’s stomach.”
Christmas in July

Our 2019 Christmas Store was so successful we had very few presents left for our 2020 program. So, we need your help for gifts for adults & kids in our program.

**Adult gifts needed**

- Cookware Sets
- Smokeless Electric Grills
- Electric Roasters
- Air Fryers
- Crock Pots (3 and 5 qt.)
- Microwaves
- Coffee Makers
- Toaster Ovens
- Food Processors
- Blenders
- Toaster Oven/Air Fryers
- Televisions
- Electric Griddles
- Deep Fryers
- Blankets
- Comforters
- Flannel Sheet Sets
- Area Rugs (6 x 9)

**Kids’ gifts needed**

- Toys of all Types
- Hairdryers
- $20 Gift Cards to Restaurants and Stores
- Curling Irons
- Makeup Kits
- Shaving Kits
- Rudolph’s Corner and HUGS
- Women’s Hats, Gloves, and Scarves
- Dish Towels
- Men’s Hats and Gloves
- Utensil Holders
- Children’s Hats, Gloves, and Scarves
- Assorted Jewelry
- Plastic Food Containers

Items may be dropped off weekdays 9AM-4PM at 1100 Pike Street, Covington, or 525 Graves Avenue, Erlanger.

For more information, call Andy Brunsman at 859-291-6789.
Be Concerned welcomes Laake, Mayes

Two West Side Cincinnatians have joined the staff at Be Concerned.

Dave Laake is new site manager at the Erlanger campus.

Tessa Mayes is a summer marketing intern from Mount St. Joseph University in Delhi. A native of Fairfield, Ohio, and a graduate of Thomas More University, where he played football, Dave comes from a HUD housing program in Clearwater, Fla.

Locally, he worked 4 years for the Center for Independent Living, which helps those with disabilities.

Tessa, from Colerain, will be starting her junior year this fall in pursuit of a marketing degree. She’ll be spending part of her internship helping to beef up Be Concerned’s social media capability.

Outing gets first presenting sponsor

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The rise in food-insecurity made it imperative his company engage with its community, Corbett said. ZoomEssence first partnered with Be Concerned in the 2019 Hunger Walk. This year, it’s also collaborating on Christmas in July, to help restock gifts for the 2020 Christmas Store. (See Page 5)

Some details of the outing remain fuzzy. Dinner after golf each day in the clubhouse dining room seems doubtful, because the crowd that typically attends is far more than allowed now. Outing raffles are in peril because of a state ban on charitable gaming at events. And there’s no guarantee the state will allow 2 golfers per cart -- now OK -- at outing time.

Mike Lenihan, chair of the outing since 2013, said organizers will continue to find ways to comply with state rules on COVID-19. “We’re planning to have it,” he said of the event. “What it’s going to look like, we don’t know.”

STILL NEEDED FOR THE 2020 OUTING

Thursday golfers – $500 per team.

Silent Auction prizes – gift cards for restaurants, stores, etc.; bourbon for bourbon basket.

Sponsors – from $250 to $5,000. Those giving $1,000 or more will get a free foursome.

For more information, call Andy Brunsmann, 859-291-6789.

Special Thanks

Horizon Community Funds of Northern Kentucky
Midwest Training
Tom & Maria Schuh Family Fund
ZoomEssence

Thanks

Anthem
Crossroads Florence
John Eldridge
Fidelity Investments
Freestore Foodbank
Graehler Family Foundation
Greater Cincinnati Foundation
Honorable Order of Ky. Colonels
Micaela Holbrook/Scratch:
Hand-crafted Desserts

JTM
Kroger
The Pavia Family
Perfetti Van Melle
St. Joseph Church, Cresc. Sprgs
7 Hills Church
Sheep Dog Impact Assistance
United Way of Grtr. Cin. & NKy