

A Virginia man helps those in need by paying for their groceries

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Alex Lee, the owner of the Culmore Supermarket, was stunned by Michael S. Megonigal's generosity when the Virginia man paid for the groceries of about 30 people. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein/The Washington Post

Michael S. Megonigal and his daughter, Marley, wanted to help people who lost their jobs as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, perhaps by buying someone some food, but the two weren't sure about how to do it.

Then, after stepping in line to buy a snack at the Culmore Supermarket in Bailey's Crossroads the weekend of March 28, an opportunity unfolded before them: Another customer discovered she couldn't afford everything and was about to put an item back. Megonigal paid for her groceries, and then some.

"We went there with the intention to [buy groceries for someone]," said Megonigal, 58 years old, an auto body worker at Caliber Collision in Arlington, Virginia. "Now it just so happened that when we got in line, there was a lady who was short already. So I just said, 'I'll tell you what. I got it.' The girl behind the register didn't understand. She didn't understand what I was telling her."

And then Megonigal told the next woman in line he would pay for her groceries, too, and the next person and the person after that. Alex Lee, the grocery store's owner, said Megonigal told him to let the register go up to \$1,000. And then Megonigal told him to let it go a little higher, and a little higher after that.

"He stood and watched the register go up, then he said, 'Let it go. We're blessed,'" Lee recalled on April 1.

Some customers were initially confused, or disbelieving. Some tried to pay until the clerks explained what was going on. Some, who had selected only the items they thought they could afford, returned to the shelves for a few more at Megonigal's urging while 11-year-old Marley ran for things and brought them back, according to Lee and Megonigal.

Nearly an hour passed — until the final tally came to \$2,523.32, Lee said. Video that Lee shot shows his manager, Mirian Calero, and others cheering and applauding as Megonigal's free-for-all wound down. At least 30 people received free groceries that day.

"I'll tell you what — you've never seen so many happy people. Really happy, really grateful," Megonigal said. "They just said thank you and God bless you. Most of them don't even speak English, to be honest with you. It was a great feeling. It really felt good to help out."

Lee felt so moved by the display of generosity that he said he didn't bother to check Megonigal's ID when he submitted a debit card for payment; he wondered whether the card would go through. It did, and that meant a lot in that neighborhood, Lee said. One in five people live in poverty in Bailey's Crossroads, a neighborhood of approximately 24,000 people, according to census data. More than half are foreign born, and about 36 percent are Hispanic.

"We're a blue-collar, small community," Lee said, adding that he wonders how his customers can hang on while the government stay-at-home decrees remain in place and the economy remains almost at a standstill. Many already worked two jobs to support their families, he said.

"Their source of income has dried up," Lee said. "It's going to be devastating for everyone."

On April 1, hundreds of people waited on the other side of Leesburg Pike outside Saint Anthony of Padua Catholic Church for free food. The line of waiting cars snaked through the parking lot and onto Leesburg Pike, while dozens of others stood on foot in the chilly spring air as volunteers prepared 40-pound bags of groceries, such as eggs, chicken, fruit, rice and cooking oil.

Yareli Bonilla, a mother of two young children who lives in Vienna, Virginia, said she was grateful for the food because she's been without work since the Burlington Coat Factory let her go because of the pandemic. Her partner, Marvin Torres, age 27, still has a job at McDonald's but his hours were cut from 40 a week to about three. The crunch has also had repercussions as far away as El Salvador, where she used to send \$150 from her biweekly paycheck to her father and grandparents.

"I don't know what we'll have to do, especially about the rent," she said.

With so many in need, the church has been trying to stretch its supplies to help as many people as possible, said Ubaldo Cisneros, coordinator of the church's social ministry.

"We're getting short on food, so we're reducing [each individual bag] little by little," Cisneros said. He estimated that demand is now four times higher than normal. On March 30, 573 people received free food; on April 1 he estimated it would be 600 or more.

Megonigal said his family struggled too when he was growing up in Bailey's Crossroads more than four decades ago after his father left his mother, his three brothers and him to fend for themselves.

"It wasn't that difficult because we didn't know any better. And she worked really hard," Megonigal said of his mother.

Things eased a bit after they all moved in with his grandmother in Lincolnia. Megonigal went to work on cars after graduation from JEB Stuart High School.

"We were luckier than a lot of other people," Megonigal said.

Over the years, Megonigal has found other ways to help people in his old neighborhood — donating money, bicycles and the like. The idea of helping more directly came up while he was discussing the crisis with his daughter Marley, who lives with her mother in Sterling.

"She came up with the idea of, 'Hey, we need to do something to help other people out. We need to find a way to give back,'" Megonigal said.

On March 28, the two drove around several neighborhoods in Northern Virginia and the District considering ways they could offer assistance. Then he suggested his old neighborhood, and Marley liked the idea.

"It's kind of strange. We knew we were going to help somebody but we just didn't know really what we were going to do," he said.

The enormous pleasure he felt in laying down his debit card for others almost took him by surprise, as did the depth of people's gratitude.

"It was fun to watch the people especially when they didn't realize it, and they were explaining it to them, and they were looking around, going, 'What?'" Megonigal recalled. "It was awesome. I can't wait to do it again."

Quiz

1 Which of the following MOST influenced Michael Megonigal's decision to pay for other shoppers' groceries?

- (A) the example set by his mother's hard work
- (B) his daughter Marley's idea to help other people
- (C) the success of the auto body business where he works
- (D) his experiences with poverty while growing up

2 Why was Alex Lee especially worried about his customers during the coronavirus outbreak?

- (A) Bailey's Crossroads has more cases of COVID-19 than any other town in the area.
- (B) Bailey's Crossroads is one of the most impoverished communities in Northern Virginia.
- (C) Many of his customers might decide to buy their groceries from less expensive stores.
- (D) Many of his customers live in poverty or work multiple jobs to support their families.

3 Read the following sentence from the article.

"We're a blue-collar, small community," Lee said, adding that he wonders how his customers can hang on while the government stay-at-home decrees remain in place and the economy remains almost at a standstill.

Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "decrees" as used in the sentence?

- (A) ideas
- (B) orders
- (C) decisions
- (D) suggestions

4 Read the following paragraph from the article.

Some customers were initially confused, or disbelieving. Some tried to pay until the clerks explained what was going on. Some, who had selected only the items they thought they could afford, returned to the shelves for a few more at Megonigal's urging while 11-year-old Marley ran for things and brought them back, according to Lee and Megonigal.

Which word from the paragraph helps the reader to understand that Michael Megonigal wanted people to get everything they needed?

- (A) confused
- (B) disbelieving
- (C) afford
- (D) urging