

The Gift of an Old Tree

New Seasons Church finds the assets needed for a successful summer meal program are already there

It is not much for its beauty that makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle, something, that quality of air that emanates from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.

--Robert Louis Stevenson

The tree standing outside New Seasons Church in Spring Valley had always provided shade for congregants. But what Heaven's Windows/New Seasons Executive Director Angela Kretschmar didn't anticipate was the meaningful role that tree would play in this San Diego County church's summer meal program.



New Seasons first got involved in the Summer Food Service Program as a summer meal site but when its sponsor could no longer operate its program, New Seasons—along with 25 other sites—had to make a decision about how to continue to serve summer meals. Kretschmar knew she couldn't let down the kids for whom summer meals were vital. She considered becoming a summer meal sponsor but first had to assess whether New Seasons had what it needed to assume the responsibility.

"We didn't have a lot of money. But we had this big tree. I started thinking about the shade this tree could provide. This meant we wouldn't need to buy tents and canopies, said Kretschmar. "That made me realize how many other resources we already had to help us make a summer meal program work for us."

This inspired Kretschmar to inventory New Seasons' other resources. A limited budget was reason enough for Kretschmar to keep things simple by building on some of the church's greatest assets including:

- **Food Pantry**—The church's food pantry already played a key role in providing food to families in need. It also provided an ideal place to hand out flyers to notify families of the summer meal program.
- **Volunteers**—Kretschmar looked to New Seasons' congregation for volunteers to help with its summer meal program. Community service was something this congregation was well acquainted with—and committed to. The program provided a rewarding



opportunity, especially for its seniors, to get involved. Volunteers were amazed at how something so simple could have such a dramatic impact on kids' lives.

- **Summer Learning Program**—Kretschmar knew that many of the kids in the neighborhood were home without any stimulating activities. So she and her team created a rotating schedule of activities that included crafts, bible study, music, physical activity and games. Its schedule even included a day that temporarily transformed one of the church's rooms into a movie theater for "movie day."
- **Community Partners**—A willingness to collaborate with other churches, the local library, park and recreation department, and other community partners helped pull the pieces together for a successful summer meal program. Kretschmar also credits a strong relationship with La Mesa-Spring Valley School District, who served as the church's food vendor.

The New Seasons team was set on working within its means to build a successful summer meal program. But it was also committed to creating an atmosphere that was inviting and comfortable for families. Little did Kretschmar know that the tree would play a role in helping her accomplish that too. Each day, a group of mothers brought their children to the church for lunch, and began to gather under the shade of the tree. The women, who did not know each other at the beginning of summer, started congregating regularly under the shade of the tree to talk. By the end of the summer, the mothers had developed a close bond, sharing stories and laughter.

New Seasons' summer meal program ended on a high note. The program served approximately 225 children each day between its six sites. On its final day, it hosted a backpack giveaway. With the help of its partners, the church distributed more than 450 backpacks filled with school supplies—and even toothbrushes—along with its summer meals.

In addition to keeping kids healthy and engaged through the summer, New Seasons' program demonstrated something more. The program helped forge new bonds and strengthen community partnerships. But more important, it provided a model for churches and faith-based organizations to learn how to build upon existing—and valuable—assets to support kids in summer. The lesson was a wonderful and unexpected gift offered by an old tree.



Mothers brought together by New Seasons' summer meal program