



BRENNA GRITEMAN / The Courier

HEAVENLY PIZZA owner Josh Elchert is shown with two spindles full of pay it forward receipts. Customers who donate \$1 fuel the restaurant's pay it forward program, which provides a slice of pizza and a bottle of water to any student after school or on Friday and Saturday mornings.

Pay it forward, by the slice

Customer kindness feeds students daily at Findlay pizza shop

By **BRENNA GRITEMAN**
LIFE EDITOR

School dismisses at Glenwood Middle School at 2:30 p.m., and students scatter to soccer practice or home to play video games.

But on any given day, about a dozen students head down North Main Street toward Heavenly Pizza, where they know a hot meal awaits them.

For many of these youths, it's the only secure meal they can count on that day.

And it's all made possible through the generosity of owner Josh Elchert and members of the community who choose to pay it forward one slice at a time.

Elchert launched Heavenly Pizza's pay-it-forward program at the start of this school year, in conjunction with the shop's pizza by the slice option. Customers pay \$2.50 for an oversized slice of pizza and, for a \$1 donation, can provide a slice and a bottle of water for hungry students who stop by the restaurant after school or on Friday or Saturday mornings.

"They basically have an avenue to come here, have a safe place, a warm place to have something that's sustaining," Elchert says of

the approximately 60 students fed by the program weekly.

Elchert says many customers donate a dollar or two per visit, or leave behind their change. One customer recently donated \$200 to the cause, and Elchert received a \$100 check on Christmas Eve from a couple in Florida who had gotten word of the good works being done in their former hometown.

Each donation is denoted by a receipt slip on a spindle at the register. But no matter how many pay-it-forward tickets line the spindle, Elchert says no child will go hungry on his watch: "If I had five tickets on the nail and 10 kids came in, I would still make sure every kid had something to eat."

The program was sparked by Elchert's talks with the operators of the Little Free Pantry, which offers a give-what-you-can, take-what-you-need food service across the street at the corner of North Main Street and Midland Avenue. When he learned how many students utilize the pantry regularly, Elchert was moved to do his part to combat food insecurity in his shop's neighborhood.

The majority of the recipients are students

from Glenwood, though Elchert says younger kids come by from neighboring Jacobs Primary School on the weekends. Many faces have become familiar to Elchert since the start of the school year, and pepperoni seems to be the favored choice among the young diners.

The free slices are served from 4-7 p.m. daily, and from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

"We are very thrilled to have collaborated with Josh and his program," says Glenwood Principal Janice Panuto.

She says approximately 548 students in grades six, seven and eight attend the middle school, and she knows of several students who are fed regularly through the pay it forward program. She says when the program was first launched, Elchert provided voucher cards to the school to be passed out by teachers and counselors. Now the students know they can report to Heavenly Pizza, no voucher required.

"The kids that have talked with me about it are very thankful," Panuto says.

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