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'Will & Grace' star Sean Hayes adds celebrity to Glen Ellyn food pantry fundraiser



Glen Ellyn native Sean Hayes is set to pick the winner in a prize drawing to raise funds for a hometown food pantry.

(Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP)



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As Jack McFarland on the NBC sitcom "Will & Grace," Sean Hayes made show-stealing entrances energized by iced coffee and rapid-fire banter.

"Big news. Hit it," Jack says, getting into a cheerleader's formation in a first-season episode. "B-I-G N-E-W-S. Big ... news!"

The same can be said of Hayes lending his celebrity to a fundraiser for the Glen Ellyn Food Pantry.

Hayes, a Glen Ellyn native and 1988 grad of Glenbard West High School, will pick the winning ticket in a prize drawing for highly sought-after bottles of Blanton's single barrel bourbon. The Buffalo Trace brand is so coveted that bourbon collectors use Facebook groups to track down the distinctive bottles and exchange the horse-and-jockey stoppers.

The first time Jim Burket raffled off his Blanton's bottles in support of the food pantry, he asked another Glen Ellyn luminary, Indy 500 champion Bobby Rahal, to announce the winner. With a boost from a matching donor, that inaugural drawing in April 2020 raised more than \$14,000 to help the food pantry keep up with pandemic-fueled demand, Burket said.

Burket is now teaming up with Hayes at a time when food pantries typically experience a lull in donations before the holidays.

The Glen Ellyn nonprofit organization has been fundraising around the back-to-school season -- nearly 40% of the people served by the pantry last year were children -- and just broke ground on the renovation of a former church parsonage to have a building of its own.

How did Hayes sign on to the fundraiser?

Burket and Hayes share mutual friends who have stayed in touch with the Emmy-award winning actor since high school. And Hayes has long promoted charities that address food insecurity.

His mother, [Mary Hayes](#), made feeding the hungry her life's work. She spent a 25-year career with the Northern Illinois Food Bank as its first employee. Her son returned to the suburbs in 2004 to headline a donor appreciation dinner for the food bank.

It's also not the only high-profile fundraiser Burket organizes on behalf of the food pantry.

He spearheads the Tour of Lake Ellyn cycling race every July and makes the pantry a charitable partner.

"He and his team who organized the Tour of Lake Ellyn were able to donate the \$13,000 proceeds to the food pantry, and this bourbon raffle is another example of his support that we really appreciate," Executive Director Laura Glaza said.

To play, make an online donation on the [pantry's website](#) before 5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 10, and forward the receipt to Burket at jkrcburket@sbcglobal.net to be entered in the drawing. Each virtual ticket costs \$10. Donate \$50 or more to the food pantry, and you have a chance at winning two bottles of Blanton's.

Burket can't say -- at least not publicly -- where he gets his own supply of the bourbon, distributed in limited quantities to store shelves.

"They're not that easy to get a hold of," he said.

After the drawing closes, Burket will mail Hayes a bag of raffle tickets.

"If somebody gives you \$500, you've got to make 50 individual little tickets with their number on it, and that already happened," Burket said of one donor.

To find out who will claim the bottles, tune in to Burket's Facebook page at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 17. He'll post a prerecorded video of Hayes naming the winner.

The pantry, meanwhile, has reached a milestone in a yearslong effort to move out of shared space in its original location, Grace Lutheran Church downtown.

Construction started Tuesday on the project to turn the old parsonage to the north of Faith Lutheran Church into the pantry's new home. The project was funded by a \$900,000 capital campaign.

"It's going to be a blessing for our clients," said Paula Nugent, president of the pantry's board of directors. "It's going to give us more flexibility in hours that we serve people and the number of people we can serve. All of those things are because of this house. We're already talking about new programs we want to do, all of which we don't have the space for now."

Last year, the pantry distributed 761,000 pounds of food to 5,470 people. The new site will allow the pantry to grow and put those resources closer to public transit and the Roosevelt Road corridor.

Faith Lutheran Church gifted the former parsonage and plans to lease the land to the pantry for \$55 a year, a nod to the pantry's new address, 55 N. Park Blvd.

Pantry staff and services are tentatively set to make the move to a newly renovated building in spring 2022.

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