

Community



Jane the Virgin's mom helps NJ nonprofit dish out some hope on

MLK Day



By Jacob Anthony Amaro | For Mosaic

January 16, 2024 at 10:18 am EST

Expand

Autoplay

1 of 25 < >



MLK Day of Service in Passaic Volunteers from the United Passaic Organization (l-r) Rita Peguero, Dr. Janelle C. Hall, Deiby Martinez, Ryland Vargas and Brionna Johnson distribute food from the Community Cafe mobile food pantry at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church on

For some, Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a day off from work. For the [United Passaic Organization](#), it's a day on.

The local nonprofit held a day of service Monday at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Passaic, unveiling a food truck that provided free, freshly-made food to those in need and treated students to a visit from Jane the Virgin actress Andrea Navedo.

“(King) wouldn’t want us to honor him by sleeping in bed,” said Darae Grizzle, a sophomore at Montclair State University who volunteered with UPO for the day of service. “He would want us to get up and do things for our communities.”

Despite being tired, Grizzle said she made sure she was up at 6 a.m. to make it on time to help set up for the event. She and other volunteers from her school and the community distributed food and clothing to passersby and helped unveil the food truck.

The food truck, dubbed the “Community Cafe,” is UPO’s latest effort to meet the needs of a city where nearly 40,000 people — well over half of the population — live without adequate access to a supermarket, according to a [report](#) by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority.

The truck also helped a growing number of individuals who don't have access to a kitchen, according to Deiby Martinez, a 27-year veteran of UPO and designated food truck driver. It will be stationed at community events and the two food pantries UPO operates.

Andrea Navedo — an actress known for her powerful portrayal of Xiomara, a character in the show *Jane the Virgin* — later spoke with students about her recently published book, “Our Otherness Is Our Strength: Wisdom from the Boogie Down Bronx.”

In the book, Navedo talks about how being raised in a Puerto Rican household on welfare in the South Bronx made her keenly aware that she was the “other” growing up. Ultimately, she writes, it was embracing her otherness that allowed her to succeed.

“If we own our otherness instead of rejecting it, we can build our self-confidence and learn to love ourselves,” she said during her talk. “If we let the challenges of our otherness strengthen us, we can use it to fuel us toward a better life.”

Students, many of them first-generation college students and members of [More Than Bootstraps](#), a nonprofit that seeks to provide first-gen students in Passaic with the tools they need to succeed in college, said they were excited to meet the award-winning actress.

“To see someone we can identify with make it big, gives us hope that we can also achieve something great,” said Michelle Carpinteyro, a junior at Emory University and peer mentor for More Than Bootstraps.

Mosaic staff writer Jacob Anthony Amaro may be reached at jamaro@njadvancemedia.com.

Other similar Mosaic stories:

[New Jersey's 'Steel Magnolia' Sen. Lipman blooms in the arts | Opinion](#)