

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

9,000 rolls: How one Newport Beach bar owner turned toilet paper distributor during coronavirus shortages



Mario Marovic, the owner of Newport Beach Malarkies and other local restaurants hands out toilet paper for cost to the public as a public service Friday, March 20, 2020 in Newport Beach. As of Friday, Marovic has donated 4000 rolls to elderly and Alzheimer's associations among others and sold 5000 rolls at cost at his restaurant parking lot. (Photo by Michael Fernandez, Contributing Photographer)

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It started as a way to get toilet paper into the hands of his employees who were struggling to find the once-common commodity in local stores.

And suddenly, Mario Marovic found himself on a roll.

A lot of rolls, actually – about 9,000 of them.

Marovic is a well-known fixture in the Newport Beach community, a restaurant operator of eateries and bars such as Malarkey's Irish Pub, Dory Deli, Stag Bar, Blackie's by the Sea and more dotting the beach-side community.

But this week, he's found himself in a unique position to do what he can to help people in need as grocery store stocks were depleted and people wanted to stay clear of crowds lining up for new shipments.

Marovic called his supplier, Paul Cassel, owner of Paul's Bar and Restaurant Supply, to ask if he had any toilet paper in stock. The distributor, who can only provide to restaurants, indeed had plenty he couldn't sell because of all the eateries closing.

Initially, Marovic bought 2,000 rolls for employees and a couple neighbors he heard were in need.

Then, he posted on social media. The need immediately became apparent.

"The amount of inquiries were through the roof," he said. "Some with serious medical conditions, because they are sick. Some saying they are elderly and they don't have it."

So he called Cassel back.

"Can I get 4,000 rolls?" he wondered.

Soon, he had enough to make a 10-foot high stack. He started calling friends in the community who worked with senior and special needs groups asking about any demand for toilet paper they might have.

"At least the community will be able to get by for a short period of time until the stores get stocked up again," he said. "It was just meant to be a courtesy."

Marovic would end up with 9,000 rolls of toilet paper, finding himself in a unique position to be a point-person in a chain of distribution that under normal circumstances would never happen.

But these are not normal circumstances.

He's had to let go many part-time employees in recent weeks as he's had to shut doors, trying his best to still pay top managers who can help rebuild the business

when restaurants are again able to open their doors to more than just takeout and delivery.

“We’re not doing good,” he said. “We’re trying to make the best out of a bad situation. We’re just trying to get through it.’

Each night, he provides to-go dinners to all his current and former employees – about 600 of them – and their families.

About 1,000 toilet papers rolls have been given to employees and friends, while 3,000 were donated to charities in the area, such as the Oasis Senior Center and **Alzheimer’s Orange County**.

When the town’s mayor, Will O’Neill, heard about what Marovic was doing, O’Neill took the kid car seats out of his wife’s SUV and loaded up with 1,100 rolls of toilet paper to take to the Oasis Senior Center.

Marovic offered to donate the cost of the rolls, but O’Neill insisted on paying him, Marovic said.

Celeste Jardine-Haug, manager of the Oasis Senior Center, said there’s a big need in the senior community, with elderly instructed to not go outside or into grocery stores where there’s large crowds.

Many of the rolls went to Seaview Lutheran Plaza, a low-income housing complex in Newport Beach. Others will be put in bags with groceries and other items the seniors need, Jardine-Haug said.

“I’ve gone to every store and there’s no toilet paper in the stores,” she said.

With about 5,000 rolls left, Marovic wanted a way to get toilet paper to the community.

So he set up a drive-by sale on Friday, where people who were running low on supply could pick up a bag at slightly less than he pays per roll – 10 rolls for \$5, about .50 cents each.

Cars lined up to scoop up a supply, some coming early so that 1,500 rolls were sold even before the start time hit. It was meant to be a three-hour window, from noon to 3 p.m., but all rolls were wiped out by 1.

“Everyone was so happy and thankful. It was so well-organized. It was amazing how smooth everything went,” said Rob Hallstrom, public relations specialist for 714 Media and a volunteer who helped. “We could have passed out thousands of rolls more ... many people continue to stop by asking.”

One volunteer handed off the bags, while another person collected the money, both wearing gloves for protection. The money collected, just enough to cover the cost of the rolls, will be kept in a safe and quarantined for 14 days.

“We wanted to get people who needed it. We didn’t know how many people needed it, until we got it out there. Some need it because they need it, some are because they have elderly neighbors,” Marovic said. “That’s what it’s all about, bringing the community close together. During tragic times, you see neighbors helping neighbors and fiends helping friends.”