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INSIDE

WEEK OF NOVEMBER 20-26, 2008

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. I, No. 8 • FREE

Lean times mean more mouths to feed

FLORIDA WEEKLY STAFF REPORT

With record demand for emergency food, the holidays of 2009 might be the most difficult in history for area food banks and pantries. And a new class of needy — breadwinners who have never faced sustained unemployment before — is compounding the challenge.



"Some of our agencies are giving out 60 percent more than they did a year ago," said Ernie Bretzmann, executive director of the United Way of Collier County. "It's indicative of the economic situation. Even when the job is lost and the money is gone, food and shelter are still essential."

Much as the United Way provides funds to programs that help the needy, the Harry Chapin Food Bank provides food to 140 Southwest Florida agencies. "In the last two years, the key agencies we serve are up 82 percent in terms of clients," said Al Brislain, the food bank's executive director. "I've been doing this more than 30 years, and I'd never seen more than a 10 or 12 percent increase in a year. Eighty-two percent is incredible."

Individual agencies are seeing anywhere from 30 percent to 200 percent increases in clients served, Mr. Brislain added. Some of those increases come from the newly needy: people who have lost their jobs and are navigating assistance programs for the first time.

That's certainly the case at St. Matthew's House. "A lot of people who come in have never done this before," said Vann R. Ellison, president and CEO of the agency that has served more than 2 million meals in Collier County over the past 20 years. "A well-dressed man came in last week and looked like he'd come to volunteer," Mr. Ellison said. "But he had a couple of kids with him...He'd been laid off from a bank and was wondering what he could do to get help for his family because everything is going to pay the mortgage. And he doesn't have food."

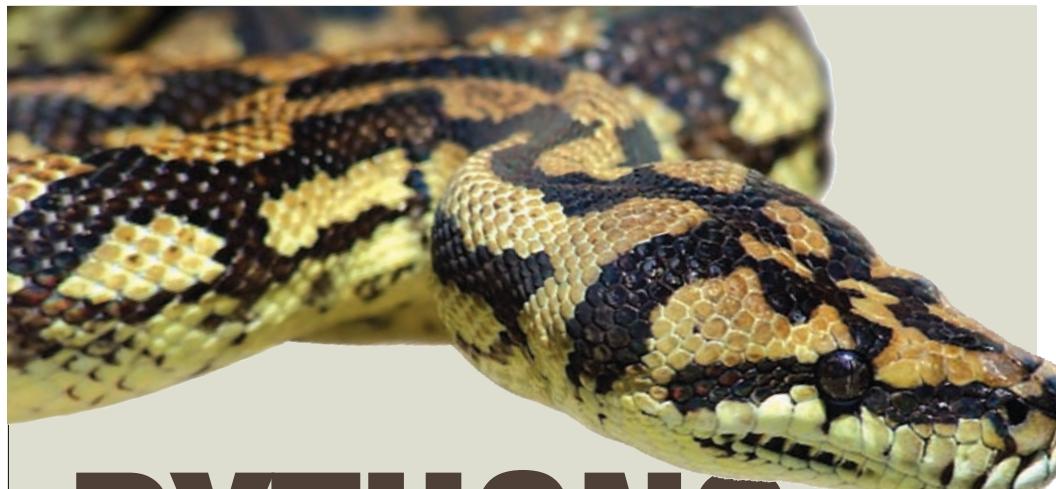
The United Way's Mr. Bretzmann describes the new demographic: "They're people formerly known as the middle class. These are folks who were working, making ends meet, and not in a chronic situation. Now they're in trouble and they don't know what to do."

Unfortunately, it's an all too common story these days.

And the lean times translate to a hungry holiday season.

In 2006, St. Matthew's House gave away 350 turkeys — more than ever before in its history, Mr. Ellison said. Last year that number was 900, and volunteers in the dining hall served more than 500 turkey dinners to residents, the

SEE FEED, A11 ▶



PYTHONS ON THE LOOSE

Largest of Florida's pet pests invade Everglades

BY ROGER WILLIAMS

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They're out there, all right, thousands of them, although just how many is impossible to determine. And at this point there's not a darn thing Skip Snow or anybody else can do about it — except be thankful that not many folks in these parts wander around the Everglades or the 7,200 acres of Collier-Seminole State Park on foot after dark.

Both places are prime habitat for Burmese pythons, which prefer to hunt at night. Long ropes of powerful muscle, they can weigh more than 250 pounds, stretch to 20 feet and live up to 25 years.

"I have a healthy respect for them," admits Mr. Snow, a federal wildlife biologist working on the invasive python problem. "I've been nipped."

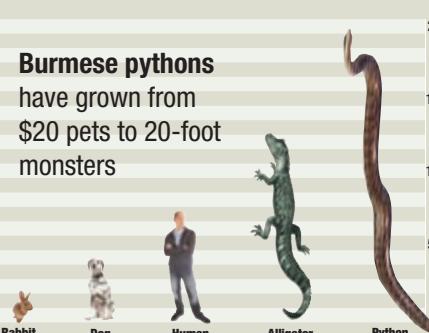
Describing a python bite as a "nip" is probably a massive understatement. They have four rows of sharp teeth in the top of their mouths and two rows in the bottom, all of them slanted inward. When the snake fastens its jaws onto something, the victim instinctively tries to pull away. The more it pulls, the deeper the teeth sink into its flesh, giving the python time to wrap around the unfortunate creature and squeeze it to death.

Although pythons are not known to be hunters of humans like saltwater crocodiles are, Mr. Snow says, "They are capable. They have the tools to severely harm or kill people. We see that in the news every so often."

David Piper, owner of Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs, has been

Burmese pythons

have grown from \$20 pets to 20-foot monsters



bitten, too, on the arm. He had to use a crowbar to pry the snake's mouth off — first the top, then the bottom.

"How much of a threat is it?" Mr. Piper asks rhetorically. "That depends on how hungry it is, and how many you have in a feeding situation."

"If a snake finishes a rabbit or a chicken first and it smells chicken on another snake — and part of that chicken is sticking out — it's going to eat

that, too. I saw a 16-foot python eat a rabbit and then consume an entire 10-foot python."

Mr. Piper was born and raised into creature care; his family has maintained the Wonder Gardens for seven decades. He has four of the big snakes, including a 16-footer.

"Pythons... only think about two things: food and reproduction," he says. Offering a voice of reason and experience to would-be python pet owners, he adds people who are very busy shouldn't have a snake as a pet. "If their needs aren't met, they become real aggressive, and that's not their fault."

Potential python keepers should also

SEE PYTHONS, A8 ▶

Burmese pythons can tip a scale at 300 pounds.



Cocktails before golf

And several other society to-dos around town. **C16, 18, 20 & 21 ▶**



Who you gonna call?

New business spruces up and maintains foreclosed properties so they can be sold. **B1 ▶**



The von Liebig at 10

Naples Art Association center celebrates a milestone. **C1 ▶**



Here's to Thanksgiving

Wine recommendations for which to be grateful. **C22 ▶**

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A18

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C1

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A4

BUSINESS

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C6 & 7

15 MINUTES

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B6 & 7

SOCIETY

C16, 19 & 21

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A10

REAL ESTATE

B9

CUISINE

C23



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