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Free chicken meals draw Orlando campers

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Fans of Chick-Fil-A camp out with tents and canopies in the parking lot of the new restaurant, for the grand opening, at the south Orange Avenue location in Orlando, early Thursday, November 5, 2009. The first 100 people in line received a year's worth of coupons for combo meals, 52 meals total.

When the doors of Chick-fil-A finally opened at 6 a.m. Thursday, 101 groggy customers shuffled in to claim their rewards: A free meal a week for a year.

The people outside had earned their prizes by camping out for one or two nights at the new store at 2885 S. Orange Ave. in south Orlando. The giveaway is part of a nationwide company promotion that's generating much more interest these days in the tough economy.

Gage Zubek and his fiancée, April Davis, were among those receiving the prize, each receiving coupons worth about \$300. They earned it by spending two rough nights in a parking lot with their 8-month-old daughter, who spent much of the first night screaming.

"I don't think I've slept in two days," Zubek said. "I'm going to go home and take a shower. I feel disgusting." For Zubek, who at 19 now has a family to support in a tough job market, "free food helps. It's kind of handy to have coupons."

Many in the crowd described themselves as diehard Chick-fil-A fans who liked the overnight party atmosphere. Still, free food is a powerful motivator during the recession.

There has been "an explosion" in the events' popularity over the past few months, spokeswoman Cindy Chapman said. "I'm sure the economy does play a part," she said.

Increasing numbers of campers have prompted the company to use a new system. Instead of simply offering 52 free meals to the first 100 customers, Chick-fil-A now raffles off them off 24 hours before opening. However, those who get winning tickets must camp out to claim them.

The chain used the new system to keep people from waiting days ahead of time. It recommends on its Web site that people not show up too early. Still, at the Orlando Chick-fil-A opening, people started arriving Tuesday night. They camped out in a nearby shopping center parking lot until they were allowed onto the Chick-fil-A property Wednesday morning.

Throughout the day Wednesday, Chick-fil-A kept customers fed, providing meals, snacks and beverages. Chick-fil-A also provided music and games. Campers could go inside the restaurant to use restrooms.

The company's cow mascot wandered the parking lot before dawn Thursday as campers emerged bleary-eyed from their tents. They waited in line as employees passed out T-shirts, hats and comment cards. (Chick-fil-A says most customers leave positive comments, though some complain about the rules.)

Finally, doors opened to the sound of clanging cowbells and kitchen pans. Customers received boxes of chicken nuggets and coupons, which they can use at any location.

Jamie Coggeshall drove up from Jupiter, spending the night with her 3-month-old son, Parker. A stay-at-home mom of two boys, Coggeshall said she camped out "to be able to save money and eat here for free."

Coggeshall's older son stayed with relatives and her husband did not accompany her. "He thinks I'm insane," she said. "He likes when I come home with the coupons, but he'd never be caught [camping] in a parking lot."

Coggeshall had camped out at Chick-fil-A a few times before. She's learned little things along the way, such as the importance of bringing air mattresses.

A few spots over were Jake and Libby Knupp of St. Petersburg, wrapping up their 44th Chick-fil-A campout in a little more than two years.

"If we divorced, we'd have to get an attorney to help us split the coupons," said Libby Knupp, 68.

The Knupps, who recently returned to Florida from their summer home out of state, said they don't need the free food. But they like the experience.

Mary Wilson, 50, of Orlando, describes herself as a Chick-fil-A fan but doesn't know that she'd repeat the campout experience.

"I prefer getting up at 6 in the morning and going through the drive through," she said. "It's kind of like skydiving. You do it once, you say you did it."

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