

We hope you had a joyous Thanksgiving and will have a very Blessed and Merry Christmas!

We all know layoffs, and unemployment numbers have risen this year. So have the numbers of guests at the soup kitchen. Thankfully the number of volunteers has kept pace. Many have found us "on line" and are willing to pitch in helping us to serve each Saturday. We could always use some more regulars to help on Friday mornings to prepare our meals for Saturday. Our Friday volunteers arrive around 8:30 am and are finished about 11:00 am.

This year we have consistently served well over 650 meals each week, and given clothing to 65 men and 25 women each Saturday. Because of our involvement with the USDA TEFAP program managed by Second Harvest Food Bank we are able to give away more than 120 bags of canned goods each Saturday along with milk, rice, pasta and at times, meats. Working with other ministries especially Waste Not, Want Not and the Clothes Closet of Orange Park and Gleaners Dispatch in Jacksonville, who supply us with food and clothing, we are able to provide for some of the needs of those who come to our door reaching out for help. We are also grateful to many individuals who have given donations through the years to keep us afloat. What a blessing! We always have the soup kitchen benefactors in our prayers.

The Soup Kitchen remains not only a place to provide the basics of food, clothing and other items, but a place to provide help and hospitality. We give our guests information and referral to agencies for shelter, help with JEA bills, and services for children, etc. At times, we make arrangements for treatment, provide counseling and transportation for guests who are ready to seek recovery from addictions. We have had many of these men and women return to "give back" by volunteering. So it is a circle of blessings that we are able to witness most every week.

Our teen and adult volunteers from many schools, churches, civic groups, local companies, and just concerned individuals give a ready smile while serving our dinners, salad, dessert and coffee. We often hear our guests say that St. Francis Soup Kitchen is their favorite place to eat and that everyone is so nice! (and the meals are great too!!!)

Many of our volunteers ask what they can bring to help us provide for our guests. Here's our wish list:

For men: we always need jeans and pants, socks and gently used underwear, sneakers and shoes, backpacks, small toiletries, towels and washcloths, and blankets. We have plenty of dress clothes for now.

For women: we need socks and underwear, purses and backpacks, small toiletries, towels and washcloths, shoes and sneakers. Again we don't need dress clothing.

Each week there are twelve hundred pounds or more of nonperishable staples and canned goods, hundreds of loaves of bread and other baked products, reading glasses, footwear, clothing, toiletries, books, backpacks; and, of course, a hot nourishing meal.

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The reading glasses come in with Jim B., a loyal volunteer who buys them each week. It's something to watch. A guest is given a book to look at and can't see the print. Jim gives him various strengths of reading glasses to try. When one clears up his vision, our guest exclaims his surprise and appreciation.

A short time ago when the temperature was in the high forties, a man was at the door, on line all night, with only shower clogs on his feet. He was asked his shoe size since the clothes closet volunteers knew he was too far back and his number too high to get to the closet window before all the footwear would be gone. A pair of sneakers and clean socks were set aside for him. Our guest truly appreciated the gift and the volunteers truly experienced a blessing to be of service to this man.

A lady who goes by the name of "Dali" came into the Kitchen looking around. A volunteer asked if he could help. "Is Jim here?" "He's over there." Dali and Jim hug and she breaks down. It seems that her mother put her house up as collateral to get Dali's son out of jail, on bond. The son bolted. Grandma lost her house and Dali had to track her son down and bring him in. Dali needed to talk. And Jim wanted to listen, and after tears, they both felt better.

A woman came in looking the worse for wear, having hitch-hiked and walked from Gainesville to Jacksonville looking for work here. Her clothes were a mess and she hadn't eaten in two days. Diane suited her up nicely, and the volunteers fed her till she could eat no more. The lady was beaming when she left and so were we.

These three tales took place last week and there were many more among the hundreds of needy people who came through the door. There were two men who came in to volunteer. They are former customers who are now on their feet who want to give back. There were a few urbane teenagers volunteering for school service hours at the Kitchen for the first time. They were awe struck by their first exposure to a reality they had only heard about. It had a great impact on them and based on our prior experiences, they will take with them an enlightened heart and a more compassionate understanding.

A New Venture: We're working on a new website that will provide current information concerning our needs and give up to date information about the soup kitchen. We'll pass the word around and send out flyers when it's ready.

And so it is with heartfelt gratitude that we thank all of our benefactors, and our volunteers who provide us with not only their time, talents and treasure, but with many lighthearted moments and sincere caring and empathy for our mission. We also thank our guests who when asked, "How are you doing?" most often reply, "I'm blessed!" We too are blessed by their presence.

Please pray for us as we will pray for all of you.

Peace,

Diane and Jim McVety

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