

St. Francis Soup Kitchen

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We continue to be astounded! For a non-profit operation maintained by volunteers only, without any deliberate efforts toward fundraising, it must be God's Will that we are able to provide all of the goods and services to so many thousands of people throughout the year. And, yes, the numbers have been increasing.

Over the past twelve months, more than 32,000 meals have been served; more than 3600 customers have received clothing items and toiletries. Thanks to one of our volunteers, over 1200 pairs of reading glasses have been handed out. Approximately 6,000 families have received an aggregate of 60,000 pounds of canned goods and meat supplies are exhausted only to be replenished the following week.

On Fridays, between 15 and 25 regular volunteers arrive to prepare the meal, make sandwiches, package individual servings of snacks, fill grocery bags, receive deliveries, and generally organize the dining room for Saturday's invasion.

Each Saturday, around 25 regular volunteers arrive to get ready to serve the customers. Their efforts are supplemented by volunteers from all walks of life who come when they can; school groups, college groups, the military, youth ministry members and people of good will. On average, we have 40 or so people available to help. And they work hard, doing whatever has to be done to accommodate a large crowd of hungry people looking for a tasty and nutritious meal. We estimate over 12,000 hours were contributed by the volunteers these past twelve months.

It is truly a unique experience. The most common observation by a new volunteer, experiencing the hustle and challenges of the Kitchen on any given Saturday, is disbelief of all that is done in a relatively well-organized manner. It is rewarding to see people come back because of their prior experience, or to hear from people who have moved on, particularly college students, who report that they are involved in a soup kitchen or pantry in their new town.

Times are very tough for the community we serve. We are constantly getting phone calls from people, particularly women who are the head of households, who are about to get dispossessed or about to lose utilities, asking for help. All we can do is refer them to the resources which we know are available but also limited in their ability to help. The need is huge and escalating, the sense of desperation is earnest. All of us are aware of the difficult economic times. But hang around the Kitchen and the reality and the intensity hits home.

It's been a while since we've heard a new-comer say, "Why don't they get a job?" There's a keener awareness that getting a job is not an available option for so many of our customers. The vast majority are anxious and willing to work anywhere at anything. For these

people, though, even day labor or minimum wage is hard to find. And, incidentally, inadequate to survive on. There's a significant percentage of our customers who are unable to attend work because of some disability, and it doesn't make any difference whether the disability is age based, physical, mental or addiction based. The fact is they cannot, or are unable to work.

Sometimes we can help in little ways. A man came in and told us that he had been accepted at a work site, but he couldn't go since he did not have any work boots, nor the means to buy them. Diane told him that she would keep her eye out for a pair of boots and let him know. The following week, Diane called him over to the side and gave him a pair of steel toed boots that were his size. They stood in the hallway, and he cried. In fact, they both did. Needless to say, Diane was very grateful that she could help.

There are dozens of incidents throughout the year which somewhat parallel this story. A family shows up with no food in the house. None. We are able to put together bags of canned goods, pastas, meats, cereal and other items, enough to sustain the family for several days. Can you imagine? No food. This is on Saturday when this family has no other recourse. Who cares, under the circumstances, how the family got to such a desperate state. That is irrelevant to us. Our reaction and the Kitchen's missions are to assist and bring aid. Our blessing is the ability to do so!

Each week leaves us with a memorable observation, an experience, a story. They are not all positive and can be sometimes unpleasant, but they are all somewhat unique to the community we serve, the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the lonely, and the addicted.

Some weeks ago the soup kitchen was very busy. We had been open for an hour or so. People were streaming in and out. While walking past table 3, a man in the end seat called Jim over and asked if this place did any counseling. Jim sat down next to the man and asked if he wanted help with a drug problem. He said he did. Jim asked if we would be interested in going to detox. He said yes. Jim asked if he was ready to stop using. He said yes, he couldn't live like this anymore. Jim told him he would call a rehab's detox and see if a bed was available. He said O.K. He was told he had to be ready to go right away if there was a bed. He said he was. His drug was crack cocaine. Jim said he would make the call.

While Jim was on hold, he asked Leonard if he had all his possessions/belongings with him and that he should go to get them while Jim was on the phone. Leonard said he didn't have anything. All he had was what he was wearing. The detox nurse came on the phone and indicated that there wasn't a bed available at that time but there would be discharges after noon and we should call back after one o'clock. From past experiences, Jim knew that if he told Leonard to come back at one, and they checked again for a bed, that Jim would lose this chance and Leonard would be gone. Jim asked Leonard if he would be interested in going now and just hanging out at the detox until a bed became available. Leonard said he had no place to go and that he just lies down in the grass at night. So, he was ready to go.

On the way over, Leonard told some of his story. Leonard is a Vietnam veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome who has been in some V.A. programs, but has lost his way. Leonard knew that this could be a new beginning. He said he had already been blessed by God who fed him this morning.

On the way to rehab, they passed a vacant lot and Leonard said that was where he went to school years ago. He started to tear up. Jim asked what happened to the school. Leonard said it was torn down because it was on polluted grounds with chemicals deposited there. Leonard was wiping his eyes so Jim asked him no more questions, sensing that Leonard was looking back at a better time in his life with profound sadness. Upon arriving at the detox, they went inside and rang the bell for the nurse. The nurse came out, coincidentally with the weekend manager, who had attended Jim's lecture series at the rehab some seven years before. Jim told them that they had come over rather than wait to call again. Leonard was hopeful that a bed would become available. Both the nurse and the manager told Jim that they would take care of Leonard and that Jim was free to go. Jim told Leonard he would keep him in his prayers. Jim left, got in his car, lost his breath, said a prayer for Leonard and moved on.

Like everyone else, all our customers have a story. Here, though the drama and the dimensions of some of the stories are at times overwhelming. The grandma or grandpa who is raising the grandchildren because.... The person who just got released from prison because... The person with lesions or sores causes by... The person who simply cannot make the money stretch for far enough because... The person who walked miles in uncomfortable shoes to get here because... Part of the Kitchen's mission is to reach out, extend a hand and show compassion.

A new-comer will quickly sense and observe that the kitchen does not judge, but seeks to provide a welcoming atmosphere, a brief respite from the overwhelming challenges of poverty and the street.

This year, as in the years past, the Kitchen is deeply grateful to two benefactors who have donated so much. They wish to remain anonymous, but we want them to know that they are always anonymously in the prayer circle we form before opening each Saturday.

Because of the increase in volume, we needed more refrigerator space. We were encouraged to apply for a grant from The Order of Malta which we received enabling us to purchase an additional commercial freezer.

We received dozens of jeans and sneakers from a donor and, be assured, they were distributed in no time. The need for men's jeans and sneakers is always far above what's available! Throughout the year, the Kitchen's mission is underwritten by school clothing drives, walk-a-thons, church drives, youth ministry group efforts, and so many individuals who loyally encourage and motivate us to continue by their donations.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who has donated so generously of their time, talent and treasure. Your generosity and service is a reflection of Christ's command to love your neighbor. We thank you on behalf of all our customers and volunteers!

SAINT FRANCIS SOUP KITCHEN

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“We must acknowledge the dignity
of the poor, respect them, esteem
them, love them, serve them.
Often, I think they are the ones
to whom we owe our greatest
gratitude. They teach us by
their faith, their resignation,
their patience in suffering.
They allow us to help them.
We should experience not pity but
compassion towards the poor.”

Blessed Mother Teresa
The Joy of Loving