



## *St. Francis Soup Kitchen*

134 East Church St. Jacksonville, Florida 32206  
Jim and Diane McVety 904.356.2902 904.620.0535

[www.stfrancissoupkitchenjax.org](http://www.stfrancissoupkitchenjax.org)

cricketjd@comcast.net

### CONGRATULATIONS

With your help, which comes from so many directions and in so many ways, St. Francis Soup Kitchen continues to serve the poorest in our community. In some respects, it's to a greater extent than in years past. It takes a tremendous effort by many all year long, in providing funds and resources of all kinds so that the kitchen can provide a hot nutritious meal each week to people who otherwise might not eat that day. We estimate 12,000 to 15,000 volunteer hours are committed to serve between 32,000 and 35,000 meals and more than 50,000 pounds of other items to those most in need. That's a huge commitment of your resources of time, talent and treasure. That's a huge number of the neediest. Yes, the numbers are up, the need is increasing. It's worth it, all the labor, hassle, and hustle by those who are able to witness the customers' smiles and appreciation. Truly, the Kitchen represents the charge given in the Gospel to serve the poor.

With the seasons changing now, people arrive in t-shirts or shorts, freezing whether they were outside all night or not, or as happens, just released from jail after a summertime arrest. We don't ask questions. We just try to help. A man comes in and says his father died the day before and he wants to go to the funeral services but feels he can't with the clothes he has. So, we try to outfit him properly. Or, a guy who hadn't had a meal in three days; or, a lady who had one old boot on, or a lady with a cane who was bereft... her husband died that morning. They had just gotten a motel room for the week. Or, the man who asked Diane if she was going to church the next day. Told she was, the man gave her a \$1:00 for the collection Or the man who exclaimed, " You are my Christmas!".

On and On. There are so many anecdotes, some really a spiritual wonder, that it is not easy to present a short schematic of such a dynamic place. Below, are a couple of examples of what we experience in the Kitchen. It's never routine, and these are not routine but, again, they are demonstrative.

THANK YOU!

## THE VOLUNTEERS

Imagine! We are all volunteers! The Soup Kitchen exists because of a dire need for a good meal, some clothing, toiletries, canned goods, reading glasses, hospitality. The Soup Kitchen exists and continues to operate with the help of countless, anonymous volunteers who come from all walks, all backgrounds, many ethnicities bringing many talents. . There are parents and their children, students and teachers, the employed and the unemployed, doctors and nurses, lawyers and law students, clergy and mission members, retirees and those giving up their main day off. It's grand to witness folks coming in to simply help, extend a hand without any hook in it for themselves (a great definition of love).

We continue our practice of serving guests after they are seated. Occasionally we are asked why we don't operate on a buffet style like most other kitchens. Though it's more difficult and labor intensive to serve each seated customer. Our answer is simple. Doing it our way provides volunteers, especially teenagers, a chance to interact with the customers and see that we are all children of God. Sometimes a new-comer, actually all of us, gets overwhelmed by the sights and sounds and scrambles to the pantry area to re-compose. Some of our customers come in with infants and small children, some are mentally or physically challenged, some are obviously victims of abuse, and the elderly. It's not easy.

Hence the 11:00 O'clock Rule. We watch out for volunteers who are stressed by the sights and sounds, who have gotten quiet, wearing frowns, beginning to withdraw. It's then we announce the rule. You must smile once before 11: 00. It breaks the ice and instantly reforms a negative or saddened attitude. Then you hear comments about how amazing the place is and how great it is to part of the Kitchen. It is not always smooth sailing and we do deal with the occasional outburst. But they are insignificant. When volunteers are leaving, the most frequent comments are positive, how rewarding their morning has been and how grateful they are to have been a part of the Kitchen. And how tired they are! That's all to the good since we are keenly interested in the volunteers' positive experience. If they don't come back to us we like to think as they move on they will seek another opportunity to serve the neediest in whichever community they find themselves in.

Here's an e-mail exchange from a few months ago which demonstrates the positive effect on young volunteers;

"Hello my name is ..... I was one of the girls with mission youth. I just wanted to let you know what a difference you made in my life. Sometimes I really don't want to eat my food because I'm not hungry. Everyone tells me to do it for the starving kids in Africa. That didn't exactly help me. Africa is so far away. Now, however, I realize I can do it for the starving kids here. I never realized how many people are hungry here. When I saw them, it just brought tears to my eyes. Now when I'm not hungry I just think of them. And I am able to eat my food. I know this sounds crazy but you really did make a huge impact on my life. Thank you for all that you do....

3.

Here is the substance of the Kitchen's response:

We express our appreciation for your presence at the Kitchen. Your willingness to experience our place and the struggles first hand which our customers face on an every day basis, and your openness to these folks as brothers and sisters. With Our Lord we are refreshed in our commitment to keep the lights on. Wherever your journey takes you, there's always an opportunity to lend a helping hand. All we have to do is reach out. Taking the first step is the hardest. You have already done that. And we thank you. It's people like you that make such a difference in our lives, enabling us to act on God's grace and preach the Gospel without words. This is what we sometimes think the Soup Kitchen represents, serving the poorest, the marginalized, the addicted, the lonely, those without much acceptance, appreciation or affection. It's not always easy and the challenges can be dynamic but doing the right thing is so rewarding that you just know the place that provides a chance to do that is good. Please come back. And today please look in the mirror and wink and say "there's a few old folks downtown who think I'm grand", because we do!

There are four regular volunteer groups who make vital contributions. The group that comes in on Fridays is essential to the preparation of the meal we will be serving. The regular group present on Saturdays makes sure the meals are assembled and served. The people who staff the clothes closet enable the Kitchen to meet a very basic need. And, the people who gather and deliver all the items we use in the meals or distribute to the customers allow us to support the neediest. Each of these people, acting as a benevolent team, makes it all possible. They are a blessing!

Mention blessings. So far we have more than enough volunteers and in those times when it looks like we will be understaffed, in walks folks who want to help. It's uncanny, so too are the times when we are short of commodities and the doorbell rings or there's a surprise delivery. Last spring the main air conditioner was not operating. A new volunteer, there for the first time, took some piping apart and fixed it before we opened. Uncanny and he hasn't been back. We happen to know Who sent him!

#### THE POOR

"It's Not Easy Being" poor!

There's no heater and there's no air conditioner, nor is there enough space for everyone who lives with you, if you are fortunate enough to have a roof over your head. Toothaches don't go away. Gluing shoe soles may work if you had some glue. It seems that \$8.00 per hour is a good deal if you could find steady work. Now what, I'm \$6.00 short on the utility bill and I have no way to close the gap. Can't do anything about it today. I have a nine hour wait in the emergency room with a sick child on my lap. Prayer is constant, for help with my powerlessness and helplessness, particularly when my child makes the same mistakes, I made. Just unable to move out, up or enter in, because I can't come up with

4.

the first and last month's rent, that's simply a pipe dream. Even working deadening night shifts under maddening noise, temperatures and fluorescent lights hardly moves me ahead much. What little I have has been mended, pinned, taped, glued or stapled for a little more use. It's not easy!

## THE LOST

"It's Not Easy Being" Lost!

They say, "why doesn't he get a job?" No car, no bus fare, ragged clothes and shoes, maybe an addiction or a record. No family, and friends seem similarly situated. In fact, there's no work hard as you try to get connected. Even the labor pool has dried up. Living next to or under the freeway doesn't let you "get ready for work". People get angry at you just for walking around, while living with choices you didn't know, or did know, you made when you were a young teenager. It makes you look at the so few options you have while all the time running in place; constantly swallowing your pride. Bridges burned or fallen down with family, neighbors, friends and even agencies that used to help. So it's off to the library, never the bookstore.

Sometimes the Soup Kitchen is a place for the lost to be found. Here's an example.

We received an e-mail from Rachel who lives in Belmont, Lower Hutt, New Zealand. She wrote: "My name is Rachel and I am trying to locate someone who has been seen at your Food Bank. I am not sure if you know him, but his name is Howard.....(she included a picture). We live in New Zealand and have not talked to Howard since July 2010 and we are worried about him. If you know Howard will you ask him to e-mail his brother, Charles. Or, if you can e-mail us his phone number (if he has one) and then we can call him..."

We responded:

"We will post the attached notice in a conspicuous place and hope Howard comes to one of us. We have your e-mail message with us to pass on to him. Hundreds of people come through the Kitchen every Saturday and, unfortunately Howard is unknown to us at this time".

About a month went by without any contact from Howard though we kept in touch with his family. We found that Howard would come to the Kitchen off and on. We discovered this from one of our dearest volunteers, Dr. Tom, who knew of Howard through a nurse at his office. This nurse was Howard's former wife who raised their teenage son. The son had no contact with his Dad for a long time, but earnestly wanted to see him. Dr. Tom encouraged his nurse to come to the Kitchen with her son to volunteer with the odd chance that Howard might walk in. Toward the end of a Saturday, Howard arrived and signed in. Howard was directed to take a seat and happened to be facing away from the kitchen area where the mom and son were drying trays. Mom pointed to Howard and told her son to go and introduce himself. The son went to the middle of the room, to the other side of the table and stood opposite his father and was heard to say, "Hi, Dad." Needless to say, we all got choked up.

Rachel wrote to us shortly afterward:

"We have not been able to talk with Howard but he has been in contact with his son and ex-wife, so you can take the sign down. We just wanted to make sure he is

5.

okay. We still don't know how to get a hold of him, but he doesn't seem ready to make contact. FYI, the contact/reunion with Howard's son actually happened at your Soup Kitchen... Mom and son were at the Soup Kitchen trying to find Howard. He showed up about twenty minutes before closing. They were able to talk and make sure he is okay."

Sometimes an individual will come in with a medical problem that needs immediate attention but he is confused and doesn't think so. A man came in a few weeks ago with a spider bite below his eye. The area was inflamed. We told him he needed to get to an emergency room right away as his sight was at risk. He didn't think so, besides he had no way of getting there. We told him we would take him "right away" and we did. On the way we had a nice chat and he described his past and current status, which is overwhelming just to recall. He had nothing. We told him to be patient and to wait until he received care, he promised he would sit and wait. He had a box of donuts and cup of water we gave him and said he'd be fine. The following Saturday he came in and his eye and the swelling were healed. He was grateful to the Kitchen and so were we!

There are stories every week which are remarkable, memorable and very touching. We could go on and on. Just one more. Here's a very short version. After many visits to the hospital, we got a commitment from a guest we have known for years, a homeless addict in need of extensive physical therapy. This middle-aged man agreed to go in-patient at a local rehab, and then a half-way house. His choices were limited. When he was to be discharged from the medical hospital, he could return to the homeless camp off US 95 and resume his former life now complicated by a disability or he could go to a facility, an arrangement we made for him with his approval, to have drug detox and a year's drug rehab and full course of physical therapy. He chose the second option. We picked him up at the hospital and took him to detox where he would have to stay for one day before placement in the long term facility. We left him with the detox nurse. He left two hours later, hobbling on crutches. We haven't seen him since. Frustrating, even maddening, but the Kitchen would do it all over again, given the chance. That's what the Kitchen is all about. .... It's not easy!

## THE MISSION AND THE FUTURE

"It's Not Easy Being" a soup kitchen!

The difficulty in the mere attempt to encapsulate the Kitchen's mission given all that it does and provides, crystalizes The Mission since the Kitchen does what it can to alleviate the burden of those who come in reaching out for help. There's always a twist, something different, something urgent, as you can sense from the stories above.

Our guests often tell us the kitchen is a blessing for them. Our volunteers frequently relate how fortunate they feel being able to volunteer at the Kitchen. Soup Kitchens grew out of the Great Depression of almost a century ago. There was a tremendous need then and there is a tremendous need now, which may be getting even greater. Wouldn't it be nice to say "mission accomplished" in the future! We doubt it, especially in those terms. Future demand is assured. What is unclear is the direction the Kitchen will take in the next few years. Some of us can no longer escape the ravages of age. Soon, we pray, folks will step forward to assume general responsibilities for the operation. In the meantime our prayer is to remain steadfast.

YOU REMAIN IN OUR DAILY PRAYERS.  
WE HOPE THE KITCHEN REMAINS IN YOURS.

## OUR NEEDS

### MEN'S ITEMS

Jeans	Back Packs	Sweatshirts
Long Sleeved T-Shirts	Belts	Razors
Sneakers	Jackets	Skull caps
White Socks	Underwear	Other toiletries

### WOMEN'S ITEMS

Large/ XL, 1,2,3X Pants and Sweatpants	Underwear
Socks	Small Toiletries

Live our call "with humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another through love."

# Peace