

St. Francis Soup Kitchen



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All of us have been charged with an immense responsibility. The road to fulfill that responsibility starts and runs parallel to the journey that Pope Francis has emphasized during his grand visit to our country. The Pope's message to the young is to dream and to hope. The Holy father has placed the responsibility for the young's dreams and hopes on the shoulders of the "older." In the Pope's words, "let us be a factory of hope, initiators of dreams, bearers of peace, mercy, forgiveness and service, enhancing holiness in us and others" when we bear these virtues in small gestures. That is a small part of the Kitchen's mission, to "give a voice to all of those who suffer silently from hunger so that this voice becomes a roar which can shake the world." We are like a squeak in a full stadium but at least the Kitchen can be heard. Even a whisper can soften their experience of loneliness and indifference.

The small children who come into the soup kitchen throughout the year bear the same innocence that all children are blessed with. Their dreams are in the moment as are their hopes. Maybe it's another cup cake or some candy or a toy. The young volunteers are asked to bring another dessert, or a bag of candy or a toy or book to these children. This causes two lights to shine; one is in the child who soon has icing smeared all over; and, one is in the volunteer who has brightened the child's experience in the Kitchen, all the while performing a small act of kindness which brings smiles to both.

Our older guests come in for a good meal, some hospitality, maybe a food basket or box of cereal or pair of reading glasses or some clothing. Their needs are basic, profound and exhaustive. One thing all the volunteers can provide is a warm welcome, a smile, a nutritious lunch and hospitality.

On any given Saturday, we may not collectively be a factory of hope or an initiator of dreams, but the small gestures and brief greetings leave all marked by the benefits of the Kitchen's mission to serve the least of our brethren, our Lord's favored, the poorest, the marginalized, the powerless, the lonely and those who probably have no one to pray for them. Their suffering sears the soul with feelings of loneliness, rejection and scorn.

It's not always easy to serve people who are engulfed in their plight whether it's self-defeating or otherwise. But we try and, so often, the return to the volunteer is a sense of true service, a sense of gratitude to be able to give, a feeling of support getting out of oneself to help another. An element of love is the performance of little acts of kindness without a hook in it for oneself. We see that all the time. New volunteers come in with a look of apprehension, anxious about what to do and what to expect. Soon after we open and guests are filling the dining room and chaos looms, you can see the newcomer relaxing, getting into the flow and actually enjoying their work. Soon they are heard to exclaim, "Wow!"

There's an old adage said to come out of the hold of a slave ship that goes something like this:

*If the mountain were smooth,
You couldn't climb it!*

The Kitchen's volunteers and our guests share the climb, albeit vastly different in slope, but in the end we all travel together.

There are many, many examples of the good work being done in our community to instill a sense of awareness, service and support of the less fortunate and less gifted. It seems each week leaves us with a memorable tale of thoughtfulness and service. Here's just a few: Each year, Jacksonville Country Day School second graders bring pennies to class, practice math problems using them, go to the bank to roll the pennies and then send the proceeds to the Kitchen. Christ the King Elementary School students decided they would only have soup for lunch one day and would collect the difference and make a donation to the Kitchen. Holy Spirit School's second graders created Easter Blessings to be distributed to our guests. Here is part of our response and expression of appreciation:

"Before the prayer circle and before we opened, there were dozens of people waiting outside for the Kitchen's opening. We went outside and greeted the guests and then approached them one at a time telling them we had a special blessing from you and asking if they would like one. All did! One guest, who we know as Eddie, took the blessing and read the message. He handed it back to us and said, "I have no place to keep this" but he was very much moved and grateful for your thoughtfulness. We immediately sensed that he treasured the Blessing, but he keeps all his possessions in a big back - pack and he didn't want to simply stuff this beautiful paper in the bag where it would soon be crumpled and destroyed. Eddie has no walls, no home and nowhere to hang and display the Blessing so he gave it back. But, we sensed he was filled with your prayer and your thoughtfulness. You gave witness to Our Lord's love and care for the least of our brethren. Eddie gave witness to the universal need for that love and care."

All you need do is come in and watch how the Kitchen fulfills its mission, and see how passionate we are about its continuation. It's a great place, with great volunteers who together help form a factory of hope and the initiation of dreams in the expression of countless small gestures.

On the back of the printed version of this newsletter and on our donation page is a wish list. If it's inconvenient to purchase and to drop off items, send us a donation, and we'll gratefully shop for you. Thank you, everybody!

PEACE.