

The Telegram (St. John's)

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Helping hands keep The Gathering Place hopping

By Geoff Chaulk

It's tucked away between the Presentation and Mercy convents and was a girl's school. Now, up to 140 people a day experiencing disadvantage can go there for help.

Help includes a good meal (7,000 meals were served in six months), clothing, a hair cut, assistance reading letters from government, help with completing applications, advocacy, fellowship - and respect. It's called The Gathering Place.

Two deeply committed women, Sister Sharon and Sister Agnes, run the operation with long-standing contributions from Sisters Dorothy and Gertrude. These women live their ministry. But they would be quick to say that The Gathering Place is the warm and welcoming place that it is because of the 106 volunteers, mostly Christian women, who help to feed and serve the guests that show up each day. One of these dedicated volunteers takes two buses from Mount Pearl to get to her volunteer job. One volunteer made the drapes for the very large, old school windows when the space was given a facelift last summer.

As Sister Sharon said to me during a lunchtime visit, the beauty of what they do is that it is circular. She meant that without the volunteers and kind and generous people and businesses in the community, who provide cash and in-kind donations, The Gathering Place would not be able to serve so many people in need. It's also interdenominational, with support from Catholic, Anglican and United churches.

I thought, circular - how far and wide does that go? Newfoundlanders and Labradorians do have big hearts and many of us try to help in any way we can, often without wanting any recognition or limelight. So, these are some of the stories we are made of:

- There's the woman in Hillview who dropped off 20 pounds of cod; the Sisters matched the donation and that day the guests had cod au gratin - a rare and savoured treat.

- There's the farmer in Salmonier who donates turkeys to The Gathering Place. One year, after the holidays, there were several turkeys left over and the sisters had a surprise turkey dinner on Valentine's Day. The guests cheered and applauded that day.
- Then there were the two guys out on the town celebrating Christmas last year and showed up at The Gathering Place "six sheets" with 25 \$20 bills as a donation. So as not to be seen to be taking advantage of the inebriated, Sister Sharon told the guys she would hold the money for them in case they changed their minds. They were adamant. Three weeks later the cash was deposited and used to serve the guests.

Through The Gathering Place, I went with Sister Sharon to see the unacceptable conditions of a Georgetown rooming house occupied by four men. The owner declined an offer to meet with Sister Sharon and myself to see if we could work together to get things improved. Through advocacy efforts by a number of people, the house is in the process of being cleaned up, and we'll be watching.

We may always need, and hopefully value, places like The Gathering Place, because life is hard sometimes and unemployment, addiction, poverty, legal problems, poor physical health and serious mental illness know no bounds.

For those of you with significant means and a big heart, the sisters could use a hand - well actually a small pickup truck - to collect and deliver the many things needed by guests of The Gathering Place.

Geoff Chaulk recently joined the board of directors for The Gathering Place. His next community editorial will appear Feb. 20.

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