

Reflections on St. John's Kitchen

The Meaning of Hospitality



Arleen Macpherson

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All funds received through the purchase of this publication are donated to The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen. The Working Centre, based in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, is a volunteer inspired venture that seeks to give individuals and groups access to tools and opportunities to become involved in the building of community.

St. John's Kitchen is an initiative of The Working Centre that acts as a hub of supports accessible to individuals experiencing homelessness. Over a 1000 people each year are supported through St. John's Kitchen, which provides a light breakfast and daily hot lunch meal, showers and laundry, St. John's Clinic with doctors, nurse practitioners, and outreach nurses, street outreach workers, Community Dental Clinic, and Hospitality House.

Visit www.theworkingcentre.org for more information.

Reflections on St. John's Kitchen

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ARLEEN MACPHERSON



**BLOSSOMS AND
FLOURISHES
AT ST. JOHN'S KITCHEN**



Top: The daily meal is served at St. John's Kitchen in the church gymnasium off Duke St. and Water St.

Bottom: Arleen (right) with Dorothy and a friend



Top: Arleen helping serve the daily meal on her final day at St. John's Kitchen, 1999

Bottom: Arleen (middle) with Stephanie and Joe Mancini reflecting on 11 years of dedicated service at St. John's Kitchen



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Friendship Forged Through Building Community

Arleen Macpherson's long term commitment to social justice

Forward by Joe Mancini

This book is a celebration of Arleen Macpherson's immense contribution to the development of The Working Centre community. For over 30 years from when she was first hired until she retired as President of the Board of Directors of The Working Centre, Arleen offered unwavering commitment for the need to support those who have been left out. Her way of working was marked by her natural ability to combine prayerful reflection with thoughtful action. Her practicality was demonstrated by taking on the St. John's Kitchen project and creating a place of welcome and hospitality. This work stretched from organizing and cooking in the kitchen, to walking gently with those facing struggles, to writing and reflecting on the issue of poverty and relationships. After retirement, her presence on the Board added to her conviction that the work of crafting inclusive and supportive communities must be supported. Her essays in this book, all of them written for Good Work News, demonstrate through analysis and story the essential work of creating better communities.

I first met Arleen Macpherson on a snowy Sunday afternoon in January 1978 at St. Anthony Daniel's Catholic Church in Kitchener. I had travelled with a couple of friends from St. Jerome's College to learn about the upcoming Development and Peace (D&P) Lenten campaign. Arleen was leading the workshop and I remember her clarity and commitment to Third World development issues. Maybe it was the rarity of such concern that made an impression on me. Arleen had been a member of D&P since the early 1970's and it was her way to educate parishioners and to raise money for those living in poverty.

Arleen knew the importance of action in the midst of poverty. Her father had been injured in a mining accident and she and her six siblings grew up at their



grandparents' small hotel in Gowganda in Northern Ontario. Money was scarce, as were jobs, and the family had to make do by pitching in together. Arleen was born in the same year as the CBC and she recounts her family's main activity as listening around the radio to the CBC. After graduating as a nurse, Arleen married Ken and they made their home in Kitchener. Her involvement with D&P meant organizing meetings, speaking to groups and carrying the message of social justice, even though that message was often criticized and challenged.

I remember talking with Arleen that afternoon and then over the years we met several times at similar kinds of events. Some ten years later, we hired Arleen to coordinate St. John's Kitchen. Arleen was uniquely skilled to combine her life experience, with her practical ability to organize and problem-solve, in order to make St. John's Kitchen a better place. From the very beginning Arleen could easily relate to the hundreds of people who came each day for a meal. Many, like her father, were unemployed for years because of a serious injury; others were young workers with families combine multiple part-time jobs; others were older workers experiencing mental illness and the loss of family.

At the time of Arleen's hiring, The Working Centre was an emerging organization with a solid connection to Catholic social justice action. However, six years after we had started, it was clear that our fledgling organization was being buffeted by the forces of charity, bureaucracy and self-interest. At every turn, we faced motivations that were opposed to the social justice culture we were trying to create. It took many years before we understood exactly what was happening. When you are in the middle of a growing dynamic with so many contradictions, the reality of the situation is not always apparent.

Arleen brought with her a way of working and acting that reflected her own commitment to find a different path. Arleen had been out of the paid workforce raising her five children since the 1960's. During that time she had honed her community building skills through her volunteer work with D&P that reinforced her ideas on social justice. Her work to establish a prayer and reflection centre demonstrated that bureaucracy held little sway in Arleen's imagination. She had also involved her whole family as an integral part of the Columbus Boy's Camp which was all about self-giving and offering service to those who have less.



This kind of spiritual and community development gave Arleen insight into the kind of place The Working Centre was trying to become. In retrospect, The Working Centre was not only hungry for this kind of leadership but was searching for people who could grasp the different culture we were trying to generate. It was not long before Arleen was at the centre of The Working Centre project.

From the beginning it was our hope that the work of St. John's Kitchen would be shared between patrons and volunteers with little sense of separation between groups. After our first few years, it was clear that there were real walls that separated the groups. Charity is our society's fall back mechanism and you can see its symptoms when rules start to be posted, when the answer is more staffing rather than involving people in the work, when mistrust spins into security responses and especially when trust declines between groups. St. John's Kitchen was becoming more like a social service than a community kitchen striving for equality and solidarity.

In order to address these issues, by August 1988, the St. John's Kitchen Committee became a subcommittee of The Working Centre board, formally recognizing our day to day responsibility. We were eager for the new freedom to create the place we envisioned. Over the summer we welcomed Arleen Macpherson as a woman of faith and justice to give St. John's Kitchen new direction.

It was not long after Arleen was hired that St. John's Kitchen lost its Provincial and Regional funding. This became the opportunity to nurture the rooting of a new culture at St. John's Kitchen. There was no longer funding for a cook in the kitchen and there was no extra staffing for other roles. Arleen quietly set in motion a different way of working, a sense of purposefulness that was about valuing cooperation and listening carefully to the lived experience of people who came each day to the Kitchen. It was during this time that Arleen hired Gretchen as a co-worker and together a new spirit guided the development of St. John's Kitchen. In many respects, the essays in this book were written to describe how that spirit was taking shape.

In the December 1994 issue of Good Work News Arleen explained the kind of community we were attempting to create:



“St. John's Kitchen long ago became a place where people gathered for more than food. People come to socialize, meet friends, play cards, support one another and help with tasks. It is a rare place where people with strongly divergent points of view can spend substantial periods of time in relative harmony. It seems like the ideal place to develop and practice the virtues of gentleness, respect, love and inclusiveness that sometimes get forgotten in our competitive and often harsh world.”[1]

For twelve years, Arleen worked in her steady way to ensure that St. John's Kitchen was a refuge of support and friendship, and a place where surplus food was redistributed through a daily meal.

Arleen retired as coordinator of St. John's Kitchen in 1999 and two years later we invited Arleen to join the Board of Directors of The Working Centre where she continued as a Board member until she formally retired in 2017. The last three years Arleen was Board President, capping a long commitment to and with The Working Centre that stretched over 30 years. Here are some concluding reflections on her journey with The Working Centre:

“I like the gradual pace of change and growth that have characterized the Working Centre over 27 years. I could not have imagined in 1988, when I joined this young organization, that it would encompass so many worthwhile projects, housed in so many beautiful, welcoming, functional and valuable buildings whose refurbishment in itself have enhanced the downtown Kitchener landscape. Nor could I imagine that this little workplace for about 10 people, some with big dreams, would grow into a collective of today's approximately 100 people whose work and contribution matches their individual skills and strengths and serves the dream as well as the needs of so many fellow citizens.

“Change has come about little by little in response to the needs as they surfaced or opportunities as they presented; but always in faithfulness to the original inspiration, goals and charisma of the founders. Fortunately or providentially, the Working Centre seems always able to bounce back if and where a decision needs to be reversed, a problem solved or a challenge met.



Appropriate lessons are often learned and necessary changes made at these few times that there are problems. This gives me confidence for the future.”

There is one other Macpherson story that needs to be told. When Arleen was first hired it was clear St. John’s Kitchen needed a logo. Her first inclination was to ask her son Andy for some ideas and he drew up the logo that we continue to use. Then she asked Andy to draw a poster that could be sent to all the schools and churches who had contributed to the coin can drive. On this poster all the groups were drawn in a circle as part of the graphic. Next Arleen asked Andy to draw up a Christmas card that we could use. It was not long before Andy developed his iconic black and white drawings, the same drawings that illustrate this book and which have come to reflect and inspire the spirit of The Working Centre.

We are pleased to present this collection of essays written by Arleen Macpherson which appeared in The Working Centre’s quarterly newspaper Good Work News. Writing these essays gave Arleen a forum to describe the daily work at St. John’s Kitchen. It also gave Arleen a way to reflect on the ongoing learning experience that is essential to The Working Centre and also to reflect on the many opportunities to be involved with life and people in ways that truly matter and make a difference.

Joe and Stephanie Mancini established The Working Centre in 1982 as a community-based response to unemployment and poverty. Today, they are still involved and The Working Centre community now encompasses 14 commercial buildings and houses with over 30 access to tools and housing projects involving 500 volunteers and 100 workers.

[1] Macpherson, Arleen, *10 Years at St. John’s Kitchen*, *Good Work New*, December 1994, Issue 39, p. 1.



St. John's Kitchen Update 1989

Issue 18, March 1989

This update seeks to put you, the readers, in touch with the daily life of St. John's Kitchen. As our supporters, you play an important role in our goals of providing a hot nutritious daily meal and a welcoming venue for socializing to over 200 hungry or lonely citizens of the K-W community.

Four full-time staff Rose, John, Jim, and Jim arrive at the Kitchen daily to prepare the meal, provide coffee, tea, and doughnuts, and to be a helping presence in the lives of our people. They are a resource for those seeking shelter, employment, social services, companionship, and a listening ear. They are assisted by client volunteers as well as by community volunteers.

During the past year small groups of students from some of our local schools have participated in our daily life on a regular basis. This outreach into the community helps us to become better known and also raises awareness of the real needs that exist even in a community as prosperous as Kitchener-Waterloo.

During the winter we hosted three Life Skills Workshops. Speakers came to inform us about relevant issues such as Social Security benefits, Public Health, housing, and wise shopping.

Every Sunday evening at 7 p.m., a small group meets at St. John's Kitchen to pray together, read the Word of God, and share personal reflections. Thus "the church" reaches out to the people with an offer of spiritual nourishment. All are welcome.

We are happily involved in waste management. Twice weekly volunteers deliver all cans, jars, plastics, and cardboard discarded at the Kitchen to Tri-Tech Recycling.

We are presently planning renovations to our well-used kitchen facilities for reasons of efficiency and health standards. Fans are being installed to relieve the intense summer heat and we will purchase a dishwasher and a new stove, and make the necessary changes to cupboards and sinks. We have received some donations, and we are involved in a fundraising effort to meet the costs of these renovations.



Volunteer decorators beautify our environment from time to time. School children created cheerful laminated placemats for the tables at Christmas time; another school group provided Christmas posters and free decorations; and a local gardener arrive on the scene with flowers, plants, and vases for everyone.

A local prayer community treated us to a fruit punch for our Christmas celebration. The St. Vincent de Paul Society provided us with a Kentucky Fried Chicken Dinner for 300 people at Christmas time.

We have accepted many invitations to speak to small and large groups in the community over the past four years and welcome the opportunity to inform people of our needs, our services, and our vision.

We are the grateful recipients of donations of money, foods, goods, and encouragement from individuals and groups who become aware of the need and who support our efforts.

We network with all other organizations concerned with the marginalized, the lonely, and the poor in order to provide the broadest range of services to our clients, to enhance their well-being, and to encourage their self-dependence and control over their lives.

We share each other's life stories, hopes, fears, happiness, and disappointments, and try to bring some sense of celebration to each other's lives.

It is in these many ways that St. John's Kitchen reaches out to the larger community and that the larger community, in turn, enters into the daily life of St. John's Kitchen. The well-being of all our citizens of K-W depend on this interaction.



A Year at St. John's Kitchen

Issue 19, September 1989



This issue of the newsletter coincides with the first anniversary of my association with St. John's Kitchen as Coordinator. It is hard to imagine that any other place could provide one with the opportunity to meet as many new people as St. John's Kitchen does.

Foremost, of course, are the approximately 250 people who use the drop-in and meal service daily. The stranger who first walked, somewhat fearfully, into their midst one year ago, now feels very much at home among these people. These are people who, after all, are just trying to live life one day at a time despite the difficulties, misunderstandings, and prejudices that are still so much a part of our society's view and treatment of the poor.

For many people St. John's Kitchen serves as a temporary source of support during hard times; for others it has become a way of life.

Undoubtedly the greatest source of surprise to me is found in the spirit of the people of St. John's. Instead of the self-pity, depression, anxiety, and even anger that I expected would predominate, I more often encounter cheerfulness, humour, generosity, simple pleasure, and above all, a lack of pretension.

This is refreshing, energizing, and somehow freeing. Total generosity and sincerity are the only appropriate responses to these gifts, but this is not always easy in practice. One's own weaknesses begin to surface and are difficult to camouflage in this environment.



I have experienced a different but related challenge in my encounter with the more activist poor; namely, the group in our community called Mothers and Others Making Change (MOMC).

Although MOMC members do not frequent St. John's Kitchen, they speak for all of the poor when they actively challenge a system which leads to prosperity for some and to increasing poverty for others. It is in this environment that my own priorities are juggled and my values are questioned.

I see the courage and the perseverance that they must exercise in the ongoing struggle to improve their own lives and the lot of the poor generally. This has become their way of life and it seems like a good model. Certainly they point out to me the need that exists to become more fully informed about the issues surrounding poverty in a society as prosperous as ours. Partnership with people requires a shift in one's world view that is difficult.

This brings me to another group of people whom I have come to know and interact with during this past year. I refer to a group whose world view encompasses not only a commitment to the well-being and empowerment of the poor, but also to a partnership with the poor. These include people who work at The Working Centre, The Working Centre Board of Directors, the St. John's Kitchen Committee, and the many volunteers from the community with a similar world view.

These are the people who support the two basic goals of St. John's Kitchen, namely; 1) to provide snacks and nutritious noon-time meals to people who otherwise would not have enough to eat, and 2) To do this in a way that does not demean or humiliate them, but instead affirms them, empowers them, and encourages their involvement in the give and take of community life.

As I begin my second year at St. John's Kitchen I am happy to be surrounded by so many people and grateful to be involved in the significant life issues that effect all of us. I am challenged by the opportunity to present a welcoming, human face of the church.



Meeting Needs of Downtown Kitchener

Issue 23, September 1990

St. John's Kitchen is both a meal service and a drop-in centre for people who are disadvantaged in our community.

The hot and nutritious meal served at lunch-time helps to subsidize inadequate, irregular, or non-existent incomes. But equally important, the four-hour daily drop-in service is an attempt to respond to many other needs experienced daily. It is a non-threatening environment where people can experience hospitality and feel welcome.



St. John's Rally

The Rally to support St. John's Kitchen held in June of this year confirmed for all of us here the tremendous amount of community support for our work. On June 7, 1990, 250 people gathered to listen to the moving testimony of 15 speakers who addressed the importance of St. John's Kitchen as a vital community resource. The Rally registered the community's concern for provincial funding cuts. Five hundred postcards in support of St. John's Kitchen were delivered to the Minister of Community and Social Services.



As well, caring people donated very generously during the month of June, greatly reducing the immediate crisis caused by our funding decrease.

Space in our last newsletter allowed the publication of only a limited number of supporters who, we felt, represented a good cross-section of the community. However, we would like to thank everyone who donated. Without these generous donations, we would have to close our doors.

Since our decreased funding is expected to be permanent, a new program was launched with the hope of gaining new supporters. The 5000 Club, proposed by a concerned and creative woman in our community, invites 5,000 new people to contribute \$10 each annually. A tax receipt and a membership card will be provided to each member. The \$50,000 generated by this club along with the continued support of our long-term donors will assure our continued operation. Please help us to find these 5,000 new members by spreading the word among your friends.

Touching Lives Daily

At St. John's Kitchen we continue to see daily the needs of the poor in our community. The recent provincial government decision to withdraw funding for emergency food services continues to be a problem in the face of so much hardship. The decline in the economy will only put greater pressures on the need for emergency food services in our community.

We appreciate the attempts of provincial staff to assist St. John's Kitchen in light of the province's decision to withdraw funding for emergency food services.

However, funding will still fall far short of previous levels. The province has increased our base level of support from \$17,700 (as reported in our last newsletter) to \$21,524 (as opposed to \$59,010 last year).

With the Region's commitment to fund us at previous levels of support, this still leaves us \$33,500 short of our previous fiscal level of funding!

As well, we have some major concerns about the implementation of the social assistance reforms which have been used to justify the withdrawal of funding for emergency food services such as St. John's Kitchen:



- Only the first phase of the reforms were introduced and these reforms do not address the needs of single individuals who often experience very severe poverty and isolation.
- The government is making the poorest people pay for the reforms by cutting funding for emergency food services to finance other reforms to the system.

Many of the people who use St. John's Kitchen do not benefit from the first phase of the reforms put in place by the province.

Many of the people at St. John's Kitchen are unable to work; most do not have either the facilities or the ability to prepare decent meals; rent increases quickly gobble up any increase in assistance they see.

Increases in welfare payments cannot meet even partially the social needs of the people who do not have the ability to successfully negotiate daily life in our highly competitive and consumer-oriented society.

It is impossible to grasp the depth of frustration, hopelessness, and loneliness felt by those who have experienced poverty. A world few of us know is expressed in this poem written by a 32 year-old single man with limited education and no family and who suffers from epilepsy.

*Hear the man walk down the road
Only to see the distance you shall never know
As it is once an hour, week
Once a month you will see
A man come
A man cry
Or another man feeling a different part of the world
For you never do understand the answers
Or the reasons lying there
All that is seen is a man, road, distance
Falling in what you shall never know*

The food, friendship, approval, and affirmation at St. John's Kitchen is an ongoing need in our community.



Providing Food Daily During the Recession

Issue 26, September 1991

Filling the Gap

During the recession of 1982, when unemployment figures rose to 14%, many people in our community had nowhere to go for a daily nourishing meal. Since 1985, however, St. John's Kitchen has filled the gap for people whose subsistence level incomes are not enough.

Thursday, September 19th, 1991 was a typical day. 319 people, including 246 men, 74 women, and 19 children came to take part in the hot meal, the friendship, and hospitality offered at St. John's Kitchen. Most people are receiving General Welfare Assistance (149), Family Benefits (32), other government pensions (54) or Unemployment Insurance (19), while others have low paying part-time employment (20). 26 people have no income.

This situation should not be understated. During times of recession, there are two major problems facing people; not having money and not having a job. For people living in the downtown areas of Kitchener-Waterloo, they know they can count on St. John's Kitchen to provide a full nutritious meal once a day. Each day St. John's helps people cope with harsh economic realities.

Homelessness

Although statistics are important for planning purposes, they do not tell the human story of people who live on the margins of society. Everyone at St. John's Kitchen has a roof over their head – in rooming houses, substandard apartments, and local shelters.

But in a very real way they are homeless. They are aliens in a land where luxury condominiums and extravagant suburban houses are the norm. They are the dispossessed of our society. They are people who have never had, and probably never will have, ownership of anything.



Indeed, they hardly own their own lives since they are accountable to welfare agencies, landlords, and dependent on the goodwill of others. Most will never be able to put down the solid roots in a community which give a person the sense of belonging and the security needed to develop, to grow, and to flourish.

Instead, they are surplus to a system which assumes unemployment for the lowest skilled, which pays low wages to some, while rewarding others with huge bonuses based on already generous salaries in addition to comfortable retirement pensions.

Building Hope

Organizations like St. John's Kitchen exist to fill the gap. We, and other agencies, alleviate the immediate need for food. We hope that we can bring dignity and a sense of self-worth and hope to people who are ignored, overlooked, avoided, and even feared in the community.

We have the small beginnings of a program which we hope will provide fun and camaraderie as well as nourishing meals to low income people.

Collective Kitchens, sponsored by the Food Bank and organized with the cooperation of other agencies, bring people together to plan menus, shop, and cook for their families.

The Food Bank's Community gardens provide fresh fruit and vegetables for other low income families in the summertime. It is hoped that these innovative programs in which people are enabled to provide for their own needs will grow and prosper in our community.

Ongoing Needs

If this work is to continue, it is important to have the ongoing support of the community at large. Raising the awareness of all people regarding broken lives, the root causes of poverty, and the growing gap between rich and poor is critical if we hope to build a more just and healthy society for all.



The Plight of the Homeless

Issue 28, March 1992

Laws restricting panhandlers only sweeps problem aside

There is nothing that Canadians fear more than the prospect of life on the street during the winter. The frozen wind and the biting cold at night is beyond what any of us can imagine coping with.

In Washington, life on the street may not be as cold, but there is yet another streak of injustice. A homeless person must keep moving, not only to keep warm, but also to keep from being arrested for panhandling.

Life in American inner cities continues to deteriorate. Canadians will be forced to listen to presidential politics for the next year from the news media. We will not hear one politician propose investing public funds to arrest the decay in America's drug and crime infested inner cities. Politicians make pious speeches while 40 million Americans cannot afford health care.

Washington is one of a growing number of U.S. cities passing laws designed to make the homeless disappear – or at least, do their begging somewhere else.

“Some local governments are trying to sweep the homeless away”, said Maria Foscarinis of the U.S. National Law Centre on Homelessness and Poverty.

The Toronto Experience

While similar legislation has not yet caught on in Canadian municipalities, neighbourhoods have seen an emerging backlash against the poor. In Toronto's Cabbagetown, for example, merchants handed out leaflets to try and discourage people from giving to panhandlers.

“Pressure for such laws is coming from businesses that fear panhandlers will hurt their tills and from people frustrated with panhandlers” said Foscarinis.

But the solution to homelessness is not just to sweep people out of sight, she told a sparsely attended news conference in a park frequented by homeless people.



“If you sweep homeless people from the downtown area, they’ll reappear somewhere else”.

In Canada the number of homeless people is estimated at about 250,000.

No one knows exactly how many people are homeless in the United States. Washington estimates 600,000; advocates and social agencies put the number higher than three million.*

Life in Kitchener

In Canada, the magnitude of the problem is somewhat different. Almost everyone at St. John’s Kitchen has a roof over their head – in rooming houses, substandard apartments and local shelters.

But in a very real way they are homeless. They are aliens in a land where luxury condominiums and extravagant suburban houses are the norm. Indeed they hardly own their own lives since they are accountable to welfare agencies, landlords, and the goodwill of others. Most will never put down solid roots in the community.

Instead they are surplus in a system which assumes unemployment, low wages, or low fixed incomes for the lowest skilled or disabled.

**Laura Eggertson, The Canadian Press, KW Record*



Reaching Out to the Community

Issue 29, May 1992

St. John's Kitchen has become well known throughout the K-W community as a place that provides a hot meal each weekday to over 200 individuals and families on limited incomes. This work is carried out because of a basic belief that everyone has the right to eat.

The experience of homelessness, hunger, and trying to survive on a fixed income were some of the first painful realities that The Working Centre learned about in the summer of 1982. The recession and joblessness brought people to our small drop-in centre who had no ability to consistently eat a nutritious meal. Today, St. John's Kitchen ensures that all people in the community will be able to have a full meal each day.

What is not so well known, is that St. John's Kitchen reaches out in many ways into the larger community to connect with individuals and groups who believe, as we do, that every person is a unique and valued individual worthy of dignity and respect. Every person needs, in addition to nourishment for the body, nourishment for the soul or spirit and support in daily life.

Mothers and Others Making Change (MOMC)

Mothers and Others Making Change is a self-help support and advocacy group for people living below the poverty level. They define poverty as "inadequate access to certain goods and services which are available to most other people and which have come to be accepted as basic to a decent standard of living."

Members work together to improve the situation of people living below the poverty line. MOMC provides its members with emotional and material support and provides a forum for individuals to feel powerful and in control of their lives. It assists members in becoming self-reliant; fosters a positive self-image among its members and assists individuals in achieving their self-defined goals.



One single mother of four children has said that, “MOMC gave me hope! The group has been a constant source of support and assistance[...] has provided me with food, clothing, and emotional support. I was made to feel important[...] I have made some very deep friendships built on common ground.”

MOMC challenges the public to think about discrimination and the degrading impact of poverty. MSW student, Susan Morrison, concluded in her thesis that MOMC is an organization which empowers individuals.

St. John's Kitchen is linked with MOMC by mutual goals and aspirations for a better life and more equitable opportunities for all people in our society.

Catholic Worker House in Kitchener-Waterloo

Catholic Worker Houses were started in the U.S. in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin as centres for prayer, reflection, and social analysis. They have provided the homeless with food and shelter. They are about community, self-sacrifice, compassion, and cooperation.

“Currently there are Catholic Worker Houses across the U.S., as well as in Hamilton and Toronto and it is our hope that one will soon exist in the K-W community.” These are the words of two local university students, Michelle Cameron and Scott Marratto, who were led to this dream after “hours of reflection discussion and prayer”.

They recognize that “there are people in K-W doing effective work with refugees, the unemployed, the homeless and victims of domestic violence, and it is our hope that the unique charism of the Catholic Worker would contribute something special to this life-giving circle.”

St. John's Kitchen links with the Catholic Worker movement in its vision of “creating a new society within the shell of the old” and in its belief in “justice, truth, hospitality, and non-violence in a world which is so often life-denying”.

We hope to be part of the larger support network that is needed for this dream to become reality.



St. John's Kitchen Report 1992

Issue 30, October 1992

Living Simply

The people who use St. John's Kitchen are the true environmentalists of Kitchener-Waterloo. These are the people who have long understood that they do not belong at the party that celebrates growth. We do not need to look at elaborate theories on sustainable development to solve our environmental problems. The patrons of St. John's Kitchen can provide us with many examples.

Their total monthly income is fed back into the local economy in payment for goods and services such as rent, food, and transportation.

They recycle the waste of the average consumer by buying their clothes and furniture at second-hand stores. They do not own cars, so they do not constantly pollute the environment. They ride bicycles, the bus, or simply walk.

Their apartments are unfairly small and they have so few appliances that they use hardly any publicly subsidized energy. Such a lifestyle is a model of simplicity that others might strive to follow.

Taking a Second Look

The poor in downtown Kitchener, many of whom use St. John's Kitchen have lives that are different from the average working consumer. We need to understand the simplicity that comes from a lack of money.

While it is true that many of the poor are dependant on welfare assistance, they do not, on the other hand, benefit from the many highly subsidized privileges which most people take for granted; namely, superhighways, travel, access to national and provincial parks, post-secondary education, leisure-time arts, and sports facilities, to name just a few.

These thoughts help put into perspective some of the genuine thrift which our society has abandoned for the sake of dreams and greed. It is a hardy reminder of the roots to our environmental crisis.



Rebuilding Community

This newsletter has also focused on how we have abandoned the ability to build caring communities within our cities. Most especially, we have marginalized those not able to make it in the world of work.

The need for redefining and rebuilding community is felt most severely by those who use St. John's Kitchen. They understand the cruel realities that they live within and have embraced simplicity as the only option available.

St. John's is open to provide a meeting place to help in a small way with the rebuilding of community. At St. John's everyday there are countless examples of people looking after people. A wonderful spirit arises on the day when a local hairdresser comes in and donates her skill to provide free haircuts.

Similarly, people feel cared for and nurtured by another volunteer who gently and lovingly soaks, massages, and restores tired and aching feet each week.

Staff and countless volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life prepare and serve food, and listen and interact with all those who come in. For four hours each day people co-exist at a very refreshing down-to-earth level, sharing failures and victories, pain and joy, opinions and insights.

There is something new to learn each day. This is living at its best. Community develops when people care about each other. One volunteer expresses it best. "I was so full of joy when I came home. It was a blessing for me."

This poem expresses the simple dream of a young man whose chronic disability determines his income and his simple lifestyle.



Fly

*Oh I can't explain
What a simple minded
Man would say
Or what he just might find
If he flew away*

*And I want to fly but
I just can't seem to find a way
Could you help me please
Cause I'm tryin'*

*Well maybe she's just a
Dream in my head*

*Maybe she's just a girl
That I met*

*Maybe she's just the kind
Of a girl
Giving love to the rest of the world*

*Maybe I'm just a fool in the rain
Hopeless enough to see what you say*

*Or maybe I'll just fly through the sky
Never a dreamer or wonder'in why*

*Oh wouldn't you love it
simple minded man*

Written by Martin Tarback



The Value of Simplicity

Issue 32, March 1993

"I and many others, known and unknown to me, call upon you:

to celebrate our joint power to provide all human beings with the food, clothing and shelter they need to delight in living;

to discover together with us, what we must do to use mankind's power to create the humanity, the dignity, and the joyfulness of each one of us;

to be responsibly aware of your personal ability to express your true feelings and to gather us together in their expression."

This is the invitation extended to all of us by Ivan Illich in his book, ***Celebration of Awareness***. Compare this to the conventional idea of progress which depends on ever increasing production and consumption, maximum efficiency and profit and which leads, as we now know, to environmental destruction and an ever-widening gap between rich people and poor people. It seems especially ironic that a world which has grown smaller as a result of mass communication, can at the same time be a place where so many feel alienated and isolated.

Simplicity

In our last issue we wrote that those who are poor are the true environmentalists. Poverty ensures a simple lifestyle by necessity. You consume less goods, less energy, and require fewer services. You recycle clothing and support the local economy. You walk, cycle, or ride buses thereby reducing environmental pollution.

In this issue we examine what we might learn from listening to those who are poor with open hearts rather than with the ego and defensiveness that seems to characterize communication today. Heartfelt listening reveals a human spirit that is less demanding than we are used to, more grateful, more honest and real. It teaches us that it is possible to do meaningful work even when it isn't paid for with money.



Some Stories

“I'm putting my life together little by little”.

“I'm coaching someone in literacy and doing other volunteer work around town. Sooner or later someone's going to offer to pay me for what I'm doing. In the meantime I reap the indirect benefits of self-esteem and knowing that I'm making a contribution to society.”

“There must be a way of rerouting or redirecting some of the money that is available to allow each person a chance to grow and a chance to pursue his/her dream.”

“I'm going to university. I know I can get a degree and then a good job. But what difference will it really make if I don't have friends and a caring community. These are the things that really make a difference. All else is meaningless without these.”

“I have nothing material to show for my thirty years of life. But I've learned that I am responsible for my own mistakes, that I cannot blame others. I've learned that a simple lifestyle has meaning and joy and that I don't have to hurt others to get ahead.”

“This unemployment has been a good experience for me. As a successful middle class person with an income, I didn't even notice the less fortunate. This personal experience has led me to a new awareness. I've learned that it makes no sense to judge. It's impossible to know how people got into their predicament without talking to them personally or without experiencing it yourself.”

“I was walking through Victoria Park one beautiful day when I suddenly realized that I was a meaningful part of all this beauty that surrounds me.”

How energizing it is to discover fresh values and alternative goals with a group of people who regularly come to St. John's Kitchen. Each individual's life story is unique. Yet most share histories of childhood abuse and neglect, poverty, and broken relationships. Often this can be a pathway that leads to drugs, alcohol, and a legacy of unspeakable memories, shattered dreams, and crumpled support.



But now, each person is “in recovery” and can measure success in hard-won gains to sobriety, stability, self-esteem, and wholeness. They are on a threshold of building new lives which value simplicity, all other people, and the world around them. It is both exciting and humbling, in this life of busyness/business to hear what they have learned.



Food and Friendship

Issue 33, May 1993

Providing Food and Friendship in a System That Creates Many Hungers

Our imagination about food has been narrowed as a consequence of food production being turned into a system. Over the past 50 years, we have come to believe that industrial products will look after our needs – through the education system, private corporations, and government. The Jetsons was a cartoon that presented progress as nutrition from a pill and that would be breakfast.

Our past connection with food production – the family farm – has become morally sentimentalized while food policy decisions have systematically destroyed the viability of the family farm. We have sentimentalized honest work, but we celebrate industrialism and packaged foods. Left on its own, this food system would provide food in the form of a pill because it would be economical and efficient.

That takes us to St. John's Kitchen where each weekday people line up for food. Those of us who provide food to people are merely food recycling systems for the waste and over-production that is endemic in our modern, centralized food bureaucracies. Some examples that most people are familiar with are the thousands of tons of milk, eggs, and potatoes that are dumped and left to rot.

Yes we are part of this big system. We merely make use of the over-production and transform it into daily meals. Soup kitchens and foodbanks are the inevitable result of industrial food production that narrows our options for food.

As we search for alternatives, we recognize that there are other and perhaps more critical needs. We know beyond a doubt that we cannot solve anyone's problems, eradicate or heal all the abuses and hunger of the past or change anyone's life. As a matter of fact it is a measure of people's courage and inner resources that they even get up each day and come to see us.

What do we do then? We strive to give each person the recognition that he or she deserves. We try to remember that each person is infinitely important in and of himself or herself. We identify with the woundedness of each individual because each



of us has also been wounded at one time or another. We laugh together at our weaknesses – we all have them. We even reveal our secrets to one another. Exposed weaknesses can be healed. It is only when they are hidden that they eat away at the insides.

The food system is in need of repair. Each day we come face to face with those who know that they do not fit in the narrow boundaries of what has become our economy and our food system.

Hunger, Progress and the Broom of the Sorcerer's Apprentice

A Reflection by Ivan Illich*

“Beyond a certain level of capital investment in the growing and processing of food, malnutrition will become pervasive. The results of the Green Revolution will then rack the livers of consumers more thoroughly than Zeus’ eagle. No biological engineering can prevent undernourishment and food poisoning beyond this point. What is happening in the sub-Saharan Sahel is only a dress rehearsal for encroaching world famine. This is but the application of a general law: when more than a certain proportion of value is produced by the industrial mode, subsistence activities are paralysed, equity declines, and total satisfaction diminishes.

“It will not be the sporadic famine that formerly came with drought and war, or the occasional food shortage that could be remedied by good will and emergency shipments. The coming hunger is a by-product of the inevitable concentration of industrialized agriculture in rich countries and in the fertile regions of poor countries.

“Paradoxically, the attempt to counter famine by further increases in industrial efficient agriculture only widens the scope of the catastrophe by depressing the use of marginal lands. Famine will increase until the trend towards capital-intensive food production by the poor for the rich has been replaced by a new kind of labour-intensive, regional, rural autonomy. Beyond a certain level of industrial hubris, nemesis must set in, because progress, like the broom of the sorcerer's apprentice, can no longer be turned off.”

**Limits to Medicine, 1976*



St. John's Kitchen Report 1993

Issue 34, September 1993

Some Thoughts

It is great when meals at St. John's are sponsored by restaurants or groups. Thanks to Little Caesar's Love Kitchen and Central Meat Market for a pizza and salad dinner on September 7th.

Thanks also to St. Andrews Presbyterian who are providing ham or turkey for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. This generous donation creates a wonderful festive day that helps to celebrate the season.

If your group or business is interested in sponsoring a special meal at St. John's Kitchen please call us and be sure to join us for the day. We dream about providing special meals based on the fruits of the season, such as being able to serve bowls of fresh strawberries.

The isolation of the downtown is striking to those who observe it daily. During election time it makes one think of the need for genuine community-based democracy where decisions are based on a deep respect for the environment, the needs of individual citizens, and the building of caring relationships between people from all walks of life.

We always encourage supporters to drop in for a cup of coffee to see what it is like at St. John's Kitchen.

We always appreciate donations of coffee, tea, coffee whitener, sugar, and margarine, as well as donations of potatoes, celery, carrots, cabbage, turnips, and onions.

Many thanks to all our supporters!



Meaningful Living

Nothing speaks so forcefully as personal experience. The following article is a reflection on work by a local citizen:

What does living without a conventional job mean to me? In the past four years I've worked about 14 months. I guess I qualify to write something about this.

It certainly isn't an easy life. I've gradually learned that in order to be happy I need to be useful, to occupy my time with activities that help me to grow as a person. I've also discovered that I get my greatest sense of accomplishment from helping others. I'm sure that this is true for most of us, but it's taken me a long time to realize.

When I first came to St. John's Kitchen about four years ago, I was unemployed, in debt, my car was on its last wheels, and I looked and felt burned out. I was living in a rooming house full of other young men much like myself – disillusioned and frustrated that life could be so empty. When my unemployment cheque ran out, I began living the "welfare" life, waiting for the mailman at the end of each long month. Life is not the word I would use – try "existence".

So what has changed? Today I live in a rooming house next door to the one I started in. I live here by choice – I enjoy living with other people. We've cleaned it up and made it a good place to live. I no longer have (or want) a car. I get around by bicycle when I can, or by foot or public transport. I live, eat and dress well, by my own standards. Most importantly, I have a sense of direction, a purpose which gives my life meaning and puts a smile on my face.

Very simply, I've learned that the greatest feeling in the world is to be able to share with other people. I have become a part of my community by devoting my time and effort to helping others to have a better life. By listening and sharing the joys and sorrows of my neighbours, I become a part of something much larger than myself. My own problems seem a lot smaller.

What happened? The world didn't change. I did – my attitude adjusted and I became grateful and concerned about something other than myself. I get the feeling that if only we could learn to share, some of the big problems of the world would fade away.

In any case, thanks for this opportunity to air my feelings - and keep up the good work.



Providing Hot Meals in Downtown Kitchener

Issue 35, December 1993

St. John's Kitchen - Nine Years of Providing a Hot Meal in the Kitchener Downtown

Next year will mark the 10th year of our work providing a hot, nutritious meal to those in need in the Kitchener downtown. During these nine years, St. John's Kitchen has been a special place for those forgotten by our competitive world.

But St. John's Kitchen is a constant reminder that many in our society cannot work because of disabilities, whether physical or psychological. It is also a reminder of the many who want to work but are not able to find a job. These are some of the over 200 people who live on small incomes and who come to St. John's for a daily meal.

They also come because it is open each weekday as a place to come and relax, meet others, play cards, talk to friends, get a haircut or foot care, get a flu vaccine from the Public Health Unit, celebrate seasons with special Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter Dinners, and particularly because of a hot meal and friendship.

Some comments from Patrons sum up our work:

"You can get anything here - food, clothes, friendship, a haircut, foot care and even a shoulder massage."

"There should be two of these in town, one here and one at the other end of town."

"I feel so agitated, I've lost my job, I'm walking miles every day. I've no place to stay. But as long as I can come here each day and talk a bit, it helps."

"If this place closed down, I'd probably end up stealing."

We continue to strive toward a relaxed, inviting environment at St. John's Kitchen. With this in mind, we recently stopped setting tables and chairs up in neat rows each morning. When people arrive each day they get their own table and a chair and set them up wherever they want. Most people end up getting chairs for one another with camaraderie and informality as the pleasant result.



In this Harvest season, many individuals and church groups bring us produce from their gardens. They and other people from the community are invited to stay for a cup of coffee or tea. Often they are surprised by the reality of St. John's Kitchen. Artificial barriers inch slowly downward and stereotypes blur at least a little.

St. John's Kitchen - it's a great place to work in and a great place to visit - Come and See. We thank each one of our many supporters for their loving help in our work.



Productive Unemployment

Issue 36, March 1994

We are grateful for the following reflections by John Martin.

Paid work will still be a possibility for many persons in our society. There is a certain group of people for whom full-time paid work may never be a realistic alternative. I am talking about people who suffer from above average mental and emotional struggles. Many of these people find themselves on long-term social assistance. I am one of them. I have been on family benefits since 1979.

In spite of the fact that my above average emotional struggle has prevented full-time paid employment, I have been meaningfully active and productive. I love intellectualism. The only job that ever interested me since I was twelve years old was that of a teacher or professor.

In spite of my emotional struggle, I have pursued and utilized my intellectual talents and gifts. While on family benefits, I did the equivalent of one full year of undergraduate studies and have successfully completed two master's degrees. Currently I am working on my own writing projects. If I do not obtain publishers I will print the writings myself and donate them to interested individuals and libraries.

I also have meaningful community at the soup kitchen where I have my daily lunch, at Eby village where I live and at the K-W House Church Fellowship (Mennonite affiliated).

Even without paid employment and with above average mental and emotional struggles, you can still live a meaningful and productive life. Find some meaningful activity like gardening, painting, wood working, knitting, writing, quilting, sewing, or taking a course. Even if you give your painting, sewing, wood work, poetry, writing, or vegetables away, you are still making a meaningful contribution to your community. Most of all you are meaningfully employed without a paying job. Being involved in communities like St. John's Kitchen or a church community is also a meaningful and productive contribution.



I am still doing psycho-therapy with my psychiatrist. If my emotional struggle would ever subside or diminish to the point where I could handle a teaching job I would be happy. That may not be the case. I may never be able to handle the stress of doing a Ph.D. and being a professor. If I do not, I will continue to study and write, even if I print my own writings. I am also on three volunteer mental health committees a month.

Simply because you suffer from above average mental and emotional struggle does not mean that you cannot live a meaningful and productive life. Do not let mental struggles and emotional disabilities keep you from living and enjoying the community around you. We all have gifts and abilities that God has given us to use to the fullest, with or without paid work.



Genuine Hospitality

Issue 37, June 1994



St. John's Kitchen has been providing a hot lunch-time meal to over 200 people for ten years. Other agencies in the community are also providing food hampers, meals, clothing, and shelter.

And well we should! It is the very, very least we can do in a world whose abundant resources are so unevenly distributed.

Any dream we might have of enabling all people to either produce or have access to the food they need for mere survival would require overwhelming social and political changes which are not likely to happen soon.

An excellent discussion of this issue can be found in Susan George's informative and disturbing book, *How The Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons For World Hunger* (Penguin Books, 1991).

In the meantime, we must do the best we can. Our best efforts certainly involve gathering and preparing the food necessary to provide at least one nutritious meal daily to those who demonstrate need.

But, more than that, our best efforts require us to recognize the dignity and the value inherent in each individual that we serve and to honour their legitimate claim to the goods of the earth.



There is so much more than food that we humans need for survival. Poor people often say that isolation is a worse burden of poverty than hunger.

Many are excluded from so many of the places and things around which others gather—not only cultural centres but also decision-making places, power-wielding institutions, and production centres.

We at St. John's Kitchen have the opportunity, in the context of a meal-gathering place, to alleviate some of that sense of isolation.

We can offer genuine hospitality—that wonderful, free and priceless gift that embraces the whole person in a non-judgmental way and at the same time expands the giver and ultimately reveals his/her true nature to him/herself.

For as Walter Brueggeman says, “The true character of human life consists not in buying or selling, not in being right or good. It consists in communion!” We receive life from one another! Communion happens sometimes at St. John's Kitchen.

The feelings of isolation are forgotten momentarily in such expressions as: “I see many smiling people. I see dimples.” “If I were any better, there'd have to be two of me.” “It's a beautiful day in the neighbourhood.” And the oft-repeated words “Thank you.” “It takes no great notice or imagination to see that the world as a life-giving, food-production system of interrelations is as yet grossly unfinished.” (Brueggeman)

It is admittedly naive to suppose that hospitality will have much impact on the unequal distribution of opportunities and goods locally or in the world. It is but a beginning.

Further exploration and reflection on the true and full meaning of hospitality unfolds and reveals to the host that its practice requires more than mere good will and nice words. Indeed, the practice of hospitality sooner or later challenges and even subverts one's comfort and traditional beliefs and, ideally, becomes transformative.

Genuine hospitality might be the first experience of inclusion and healing for those whose lives have known only uprootedness and isolation.

Genuine hospitality might even be a treasure, a pleasure, and a most generous gift to our impoverished world. Genuine hospitality begets life and new relationships with the world and all those in it.

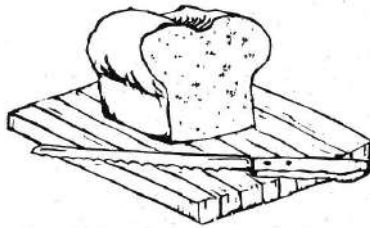


More Than Bread Making

Issue 38, September 1994

I wonder what it is about the smell of yeast, as it works its special magic in the rising of fresh dough, that also gives rise to feeling of comfort, communion, pleasure, and anticipation? This is what happened one Thursday afternoon in July when ten adults and four children gathered after regular hours at St. John's Kitchen to learn the art of breadmaking.

Breadmaking was one of the five sessions that brought together some of us interested in learning how to live simply but well in an increasingly unaffordable, impersonal, and complex world.



We learned first hand that it was possible to provide a healthy and delicious diet for the average family throughout the year with the produce either from one's own garden or that of a local farmer, with only minimal reliance on commercial sources.

We learned that to clothe oneself or one's family practically and in an attractive manner doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg. There are many alternatives.

Similarly, with a little imagination, creativity, and the talents we all possess we can minimize the cost of furnishing a home.

And what about getting around? We all had to gather in one central location from around the city. Some walked, some rode bicycles, some came by public transit. Only two of us drove cars.



Commonplace Living

The oldest person in the group remembers a time when none of these activities were special events but instead were commonplace, everyday occurrences that just went along with providing a home and raising a family. Almost everyone had access to the simple tools needed and learned the skills necessary to get by.

No one person had to do everything, each person in a family or community, regardless of age, could do something. Up until just recently, basic cooking, sewing, gardening, canning, building, and maintenance skills were passed on from generation to generation.

There was plenty of meaningful, (though not necessarily paid) work to insure that each person felt needed and useful. It could easily be argued that those were less hectic, less expensive times in which to live. And, of course, this is true. But isn't it also true that much of our time, energy and money is expended today in the purchase of processed and manufactured goods that we don't really need for wholesome and meaningful living?

Relearning an Art

The younger members of the group have never seen, much less experienced, kneading dough to make bread or canning foods in season for use during the winter.

For many young people these are unusual, isolated events far removed from the hundreds of loaves of bread and rows of canned goods on the supermarket shelves. Most of us, in fact, are very far removed physically and spiritually from the sources of our food.

The Joy

It was such a simple thing to gather together fourteen people from three generations to bake bread and to build a salad with ingredients culled from backyard gardens. But far more was realized than just twelve loaves of mouth-watering bread and four dozen chelsea buns!

Consider the smell, sight, taste, and nutritional value of a good home-baked bread. Consider the fun and sense of companionship that came from sharing a task and socializing with others.



Consider the sense of accomplishment and the boost in self-confidence that comes from a sense of being competent to produce from beginning to end something for one's own use.

Consider also the recovery of those eternal basic human skills which have been almost forgotten in our world of instant and disposable everything.

These are the skills that link the generations and give a sense of place and rootedness to us human beings who can so easily feel alienated and lonely in a fast-paced world.

Our modern economy depends so much on the growing consumption of goods and services as well as on the rapid depletion of limited resources. Yet it is a system that cannot guarantee even basic survival for a large number of the world's people.

Nor is it able to promote harmony, cooperation, and well-being among all people because of its emphasis on growth and competition. Walter Brueggeman expresses it well: "The dominant infrastructure of consumerism contains little good news."

An Alternative

Brueggeman proposes an alternative infrastructure which "heals, redeems and transforms." It seems to me that this is what happens, at least in a small way, when people get together to learn and recover basic human skills.

Certainly there is something calming and healing about working with one's hands; creative juices begin to flow when the mind is freed from complex cares.

Everyone can master simple tools and utensils. And, as one begins to create, one begins to build a sense of harmony with oneself, with others and with nature.

Then, with only a small leap of imagination, one can begin to distinguish between those things which truly nourish and transform life and those which are merely manufactured needs.

Such transformation does not take place overnight. It is a slow, steady process in which some learning and some unlearning take place a little at a time. It is the cumulative power of these little experiences of joyful, simple living which seem truly to be good news.



10 Years at St. John's Kitchen

Issue 39, December 1994

January 14, 1995 will mark the tenth anniversary of St. John's Kitchen. During its first five years, the number of meals served daily grew slowly from 50 to an average of 220 and has remained constant ever since.

Initially it was thought that the need for this service might disappear when the recession ended. It has now become obvious that St. John's Kitchen and its counterparts throughout the country provide a unique and critical service to people who, for one reason or another, consistently find themselves pushed to the margins of society. Brewster Kneen, writing in *From Land To Mouth* says, "There were estimated to be more than two million people, including 800,000 children, using more than 400 foodbanks across Canada in 1993." And, at last count, food programs outnumbered McDonalds outlets 2000 to 643. As Toronto's Medical Officer of Health said recently on CBC Radio, "At the end of a decade of wealth creation, we have more people than ever going to foodbanks and soup kitchens."

With two million people regularly using food programs across Canada (over 200 daily in Waterloo Region alone), the reality of this situation challenges us almost daily to re-imagine the environment in which the food is offered.

The enduring beauty and opportunity at St. John's has been its evolutionary nature over 10 years. Originally the task at hand consisted mainly of gathering equipment and food and finding enough staff and volunteers to get a meal on the table by lunch hour. No mean task!

Through the efforts and support of many, St. John's Kitchen now has a well-equipped kitchen, reliable sources of food, and wonderful volunteers. Our full-time cook is retiring soon, but he is leaving us with a well-organized kitchen, well-established safety and health habits, and many good recipes. Meals of good quality will continue to be served daily but the time seems ripe for focusing energy and dreams on creating a more inclusive community.



St. John's Kitchen long ago became a place where people gathered for more than food. People came to socialize, meet friends, play cards, support one another, and sometimes help with tasks. It is a rare place where people with strongly divergent viewpoints can spend substantial periods of time in relative harmony. It seems like the ideal place to develop and practice the virtues of gentleness, respect, love, and inclusiveness that sometimes seem forgotten in our competitive and often harsh world. Nonetheless, despite its inherent capacity to become a self-help community of people working together toward a common goal, St. John's Kitchen persists more as a service in which there are providers and consumers.

We have learned over the years that it is not in the best interests of people to continue to build institutions or to entrench services. These quickly become self-serving and self-justifying, very expensive, and slowly destroy the people they intend to help.

It is so easy for us service providers to assume almost automatically the task of "fixing people". All people may need healing or caring during their lives but it seems disrespectful to assume that another person needs fixing.

What seems needed, rather, are inclusive associations wherein all people are given an equal chance to contribute, to grow, to create, and wherein all are valued for their capacities rather than seen for their deficiencies or needs. It is our challenge in the coming year to build real relationships with people that are not based on "professionalism" or "clienthood", but rather on the give and take in a caring community.

Now seems like a propitious time to leave the staff position of cook open and to see what happens. It is our hope that, within a more open framework, more people at St. John's will choose to become involved in the preparation and cooking of food and in the maintenance of the facilities. We hope also that associations and groups of people in the larger community might want to provide a meal from time to time. Over the years this has been a satisfying and rewarding activity for numerous groups.

We expect that growing pains will accompany this change. After all, communities require a certain lack of structure, formality, and rigidity to flourish. It may even appear, on the surface, that they are disordered, messy, and inefficient. But this very



disorder allows for inclusion of a wide variety of people. The need to incorporate both fallibility and capacity must, at times, supersede the need for efficiency. The essence of community is people working together; many different talents and skills are needed. Our ongoing challenge is to create a haven, a space for people that is naturally warm and welcoming.

With enough willing people we may be able to repeat an activity at St. John's Kitchen that was very successful last summer when several people baked bread after hours one day using the Kitchen's ideal space and equipment. It was fun for all and we hope to include more people in the future. We will even consider making casseroles, soups, and desserts. It will be a learning experience for many of us, but experienced people are warmly welcome to share their expertise.

We are enthusiastic about locally grown vegetables and fruit that can be incorporated into our daily meal. The harvest was generous this fall and an interest is developing around organic gardening for St. John's. Links have been made with farmers and would-be gardeners. Perhaps, by next summer, a combination of donations and our own produce will satisfy our need for fresh vegetables.

Celebrating Ten Years

Our greatest cause for celebration is the wonderful and generous support that we receive from volunteers and from donors in the community. Individuals, schools, churches, service clubs, businesses, and other groups make us feel that we are part of a caring community.

We celebrate also the lives of all those who for so many reasons have their meals at St. John's. While often poor materially, they are individuals from whom we have learned a lot about courage, simplicity, generosity, gratitude, perseverance, survival, and joy!

We welcome all visitors to St. John's Kitchen. It is the best way to experience what a wonderful meeting and gathering place it is.



Community In Action

Issue 40, March 1995

What a great party it was! The Celebration Dinner on January 19th marking the 10th Anniversary of St. John's Kitchen brought together people from all walks of life in Kitchener and Waterloo. Patrons, volunteers, and supporters of the Kitchen enjoyed together an Italian dinner provided by the Cortina Club. Although there were no "spirits" in the pre-dinner punch, there was plenty of "friendly spirit" in the air. It was an opportunity for many people to just relax, socialize, and celebrate. "Did you notice how well everyone mingled?" asked a long-time volunteer and friend of the Kitchen. While most dinners in the community have a cost that is beyond the pocketbook of many people, a reduced price of \$5 for unemployed people made the Celebration Dinner accessible to all who wished to come. The result was an experience of friendly, diverse, and possibly more authentic community.

John McKnight (associate director of the Centre for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University in Chicago) describes community as the basic context for enabling people to contribute their gifts and to solve their problems. He says that, "Everyone has a gift and a good community is a place where all these gifts are given." This is so different from our modern obsession with providing services and entrenching institutions. These have a way of defining people simply as individuals in a system with needs which must be serviced or deficiencies which must be fixed.

Ongoing reflection on the goals and the nature of St. John's Kitchen has gradually led to an awareness that we should move as far as possible from being a service provided by a capable few to others who appear to have needs. Indeed, we learn that we all have needs, we all need help, and that we are all well served by dropping barriers, by calling on the abilities and skills of everyone, and by working together to build community.

And it's so much fun! Many people were involved one recent Thursday in providing, preparing, cooking, serving, and eating the first ever steak dinner at St. John's Kitchen. A miraculous chain of events started in the morning and didn't end



until dinner was served and enjoyed by all. A rare shipment of rib-eye steaks arrived from the foodbank. Although we couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, we regretted that there weren't enough of these small steaks to serve two to everyone. Not to worry! Just then a local couple appeared at the door carrying boxes of meat from their freezer and, among other things, there were two more boxes of rib-eye steaks – enough for two each for everyone. We already had potatoes and sour cream as well as fresh, crispy vegetables but were thinking that a salad would put the finishing touches on this meal. Well, a trip to Central Meat Market and a quick explanation to the assistant manager was all it took to get the necessary two cases of lettuce. We soon had our salad – at no cost.

A new volunteer had joined us that day and overheard our discussion of how best to cook the steak. She chimed in that she had years of experience cooking in a hotel and could easily prepare the steaks and fried onions on our grill, but that some steak spice would really liven it up. Just then a woman arrived who had just emptied out her elderly aunt's cupboards. She was carrying a box filled with condiments and spices which included, you guessed it, steak spice!

Many hands scrubbed potatoes, cooked vegetables, buttered buns, and served it all up as the steaks came off the grill. Words of surprise, delight, and appreciation filled the air. It was a tired but happy crew that had pitched in to prepare a feast for 240 people. Others soon took up where they left off and started to clean up.

So many people contributed to make this day the miracle that it was. So many gifts were given and shared. Some people played a significant part in the whole picture. If perchance you the reader are one of these people, please know that you are appreciated and that you are an important part of building this community. It is truly and senseless acts of beauty that enliven the world around us.

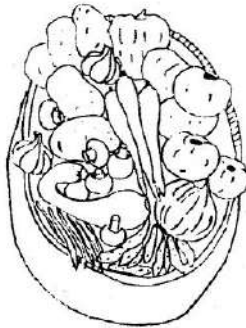


Guess Who Came to Dinner

Issue 41, June 1995

Throughout the month of May we have had some unusual guests for the noontime meal at St. John's Kitchen. Normally, our diners are mostly people whose meagre incomes can not guarantee even a basic diet throughout the whole month. So when K-W Hospital decided that it would reach out to the whole community during its 100th Anniversary year, it seemed fitting and meaningful that service providers might benefit from an encounter with street people clients on their own turf.

This resulted in an initiative entitled Soup, Sandwiches, and Street Sensitivity which brought in about 140 workers from the hospital, social services, legal services, correctional services, faith communities, business people, and politicians to get acquainted with all of us at St. John's Kitchen.



Some had to overcome fears and misconceptions about a place that has been part of the K-W community for over ten years. For even though SJK receives, with gratitude, financial and moral support from about 10,000 people in K-W, most have never visited and thus have a limited view of how it runs and what really goes on. All of our guests seemed to appreciate the experience and to gain fresh insight and understanding. We all met new people and had the chance to interact with caring people from all walks of life.



A panel discussion on the final day, attended by about 40 people, challenged everyone to discover new ways of being with people and new ways of being human. Al Collins, Director of K-W Hospital, concluded that this had been an historic event and that the dialogue begun that day should continue.

Discovering New Ways of Being With People

John McKnight, in *Regenerating Community*, talks about building communities from the inside out. This suggests that all the gifts and skills necessary for community already exist and only need to be welcomed. This welcoming and blessing of people and their gifts has certainly borne fruit at SJK. It is so energizing and life giving to be a part of the daily lives of so many people who enthusiastically offer to cook, serve, drive the van, do the daily pick-ups, dishes, cleaning, listening, caring, and nurturing.

Albert Schweitzer, in his autobiography *Out of My Life and Thought*, described the food cooked in a prisoner of war camp in 1917 by shoemakers, tailors, etc. who had to double duty as cooks, as a triumph. Non-cooks were made “Cooks”, he said and when they were asked the secret of their success they replied: “One must know all sorts of things, but the most important is to do the cooking with love and care.” Well, a lot of love has been going into the soups, stews, casseroles, etc. at St. John's Kitchen and the non-cooks who have become cooks are deriving a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from their work.

Gretchen and I (the only staff members left) both love going into work each day. We greet and are greeted by so many cheerful hellos and generous remarks. Worries, concerns, and even fatigue come into proper perspective and are so often replaced with laughter and love and warmth. What truly surprises us (though it shouldn't) is the awareness that the work of the day could get done without us. We would never have thought that even a few months ago.

Converting from Service to Community

For quite some time at St. John's Kitchen we felt that we were providing a much-needed service, namely serving a hot nutritious meal to people who needed it. Very few people were encouraged to be involved beyond the mere act of lining up to receive the meal and then eating it. But if we really believe that food is one of the



basic rights of all people, how can we tolerate the artificial divisions that arise between the served and the server? It seems more reasonable and just to involve all willing people as broadly as possible.

John McKnight says that:

While we have reached the limits of institutional problem solving, we are only at the beginning of exploring the possibility of a new vision for community. It is a new vision of regeneration. It is a vision re-associating the exiled. It is a vision of freeing ourselves from service and advocacy. It is a vision of centering our lives in community.

This makes so much sense when one has met so many people who are not helped by institutionalized services. It makes even more sense when one sees people come alive when they are included in the daily operation, decision making, and privileges.

This process has not happened overnight. Nor is it complete. Age-old attitudes, power struggles, mistrust, fears, and insecurities are only changed gradually. I am often reminded of Dorothy Day's guiding principle that change occurs and things get done "little by little." For meaningful and lasting growth to occur, it seems important to strive for awareness of these little changes and to nurture them. Something special can happen when we share a meal or "break bread" with others. It has the potential to be an exchange of the love which we all need.

John Robbins, author of ***May All Be Fed***, says it well:

There are many forms of hunger. There is the hunger for food, and there is the hunger for love, for purpose, for truth. There is the hunger for health, for happiness. There is the hunger for companionship, for inner peace, for the sense that we belong. There is the hunger for laughter, and there is the hunger for God.

The hunger that lives in the human heart is part of the kinship that threads us all together. We are independent beings with a profound need both to give and to receive from each other. For what one of us is lacking, another has in abundance, whether that be a bowl of rice, a skill, a wisdom, a capacity for joy, a knowledge, or a courageous heart. Our urges and our gifts, our longings and our offerings, are all needed and are all indispensable.



If we are touched by the images of men, women, children that we have seen starving for food, it is because they are a reflection of our own need. They are a reminder not only of that part of us that is hungry, but also of that part of us that needs to give in order to be whole.”

Continuing the Dialogue

Visitors to St. John’s Kitchen are welcome year-round. We value your interest and support. One person from the hospital has become a volunteer and we will continue to meet with others. Above all, we will continue to dialogue with all regular participants. Our month-long “dinner party” has enriched us all!



Joyful Work

Issue 42, October 1995

Dave is a very intelligent well read young man with many painful but rich life experiences who was recently chosen from among a number of candidates for his first real job in over 10 years. I have never seen anyone so excited and so grateful to get work. It was hard to tell if he was laughing or crying as he raised his arms high in the air and shouted “Thank you God! I want to run down King Street and tell everyone how grateful I am”. What a privilege to witness such joy and exuberance! It is also a tribute to his new employers that they recognized Dave's skills and talents and valued his life experiences over academic credits. He is so proud to be able to tell his six-year old son that “Daddy has a job” and to be able to show him where he works.

But very few people at St. John's Kitchen are so lucky. So often we hear “I've been looking for a job for the past year” or “if I could just get a job, life would be better” or “I'll do anything, any kind of work”. This is when you realize that jobs are given such high priority and high value when, unfortunately, there just aren't enough of them to go around.

But there are also people who recognize that jobs don't solve all the problems or even necessarily give meaning to life. We know people who build structure and meaning into their day by a combination of part-time paid work, volunteer services to St. John's Kitchen, The Working Centre, and other places, regular exercise, reading, use of library resources, participation in Community Gardens, and other projects. They make a very positive contribution wherever they go and it is so pleasant and so energizing just to hang out with them over a cup of coffee. Their simple, thoughtful lifestyles are not only productive but also might easily be seen as friendly to the environment and all that is vital to us. They model quite naturally the Gospel imperative to:

“Act justly, Love tenderly and Walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6



Jobs Not Always a Priority

Of more critical concern than jobs for many people at St. John's Kitchen is the issue of survival. And mere survival for the majority of people at St. John's Kitchen, as well as many others, is about to become more of a challenge this month when the government cuts of over twenty percent to Social Assistance incomes kick in. After all, where can you find shelter that costs less when you are already living in the cheapest rooming houses in town?

How can you spend less money on clothing when you already shop at second-hand stores or get your clothing free at St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store (if your size is available)? And how can you budget for food when you are already relying on soup kitchens and food hamper programs for most of what you eat?

Premier Harris tells us that people will be allowed to get jobs to make up for the over 20% of income that they are about to lose. Really? Where are all these jobs to be found? The reason that over 200 people come each day to St. John's Kitchen for a meal is precisely because they are not able to find paid work, or because they can only find part-time low-paying work, or because a serious disability prevents them from working.

If the powers that be would only acknowledge that there are not enough paying jobs available, maybe we all could refocus energy and resources towards visioning and developing communities which cooperate and share in order that there might be reasonable quality of life for everyone. The familiar economic system rewards only a few people, impoverishes a growing number and marginalizes others at the same time that it wreaks havoc on the environment. It seems like the antithesis of the Gospel exhortation to:

"Act justly, Love tenderly and Walk humbly with your God." Micah 6

Joyful Work at St. John's Kitchen

It is a joy to reflect on the fifty or more people who voluntarily come in to St. John's Kitchen to be part of a team that prepares a daily meal for over 200 people. They come from all walks of life, they come not for any reward but because they enjoy the



work, and they come because they need a good meal and want to contribute towards it. Everyone works closely with staff in an atmosphere of conviviality and sharing.

A further cost of rapid economic and political expansion during the past few decades has been the loss of community gathering places where people from diverse backgrounds met, rubbed elbows, exchanged a vast array of ideas, and learned from one another. We are much more likely now to be isolated inside our own homes or within exclusive clubs with people who look and think much like ourselves. Not much chance to hear fresh ideas there and not much room for alternative or expansive thinking.



St. John's Kitchen has become something of a gathering place that does promote the exchange of many diverse ideas and that does encourage conversation and camaraderie across class lines. It is a place where democracy is practiced. These conditions make it easier for many people to believe that they have something worthwhile to contribute. In this situation, people are built up and strengthened rather than being demoralized and rendered dependent. They are doing good work; that is, work that is useful, simple, necessary, does not require much technology, and is non-destructive. They have heard the Gospel call to: *“Act justly, Love tenderly, and Walk humbly with your God.”* Micah 6



Incarnation and Hope

Issue 43, December 1995

Sharing a Meal Each Day

"Welcome back friends, we're glad to see you. We're happy to be able to share a meal with you once again." These were the sentiments at St. John's Kitchen following a week during which we had to close for the Annual Pudding Factory.

Pudding Factory Week, held annually for more than 40 years during the first full week of November as the main fundraiser for the charitable works of St. John's Anglican Church, changes the routine of St. John's Kitchen. The bad news is that those people who depend on us for their only hot meal of the day, must make do with a bag lunch for that one week. The good news, however, is manifold. It is an opportunity for church workers and kitchen workers to interact more closely; it is an opportunity to accomplish tasks at St. John's Kitchen that can't be done during a regular work week and it is a week during which the relationships between all of us who make up St. John's Kitchen are enhanced. We miss each other; we miss the friendly camaraderie that is part of our daily lives and we worry about our homeless friends who really depend on St. John's Kitchen as a place to come in out of the cold. Our joy and gratitude for each other and for shared daily work deepens. We're glad to see each other on the second Monday of November when the kitchen reopens.

Good Works

One week was just long enough to give St. John's Kitchen a much needed face lift. Volunteers, students, and staff combined skills and efforts to make and hand out 200 substantial bag lunches each day, to houseclean cupboards and storage areas, to scrub, wax, and polish floors, and to paint the kitchen. Throughout these hours we were entertained with wonderful music provided by Wally, a very gifted piano player. Wally sets many feet and hearts to dancing and, occasionally, voices to singing! He is at St. John's Kitchen almost every day.



More Good Works

Someone else who might be said to set feet dancing is Caroline, our Foot Care giver. Every Friday for the past three years she has donated her time and skills to soaking, massaging, and repairing feet that have been abused by miles of walking in inadequate footwear. Her generous spirit and gentle touch are a soothing balm to tired "souls" as well as tired "soles". After being fitted with a new pair of socks (also donated) many people are heard to say: "I feel as though I'm walking on a cloud."

On Wednesday, November 29th, between 9:00 AM and 3:00 PM, Janeen, our former volunteer hairdresser will return for the day with three of her coworkers for a first-ever St. John's Kitchen Cut-A-Thon. All those who need it will get a free professional haircut and Janeen hopes that many people in the community will sponsor this event. She anticipates that up to 80 haircuts will be given and all proceeds will be donated to St. John's Kitchen.

Celebrations

Thanksgiving dinner was a triumph and a tribute to both Gretchen, the Community Worker at St. John's Kitchen, and also some of the world's most wonderful and generous volunteers. Over 300 people who stood in the long line up were rewarded with a turkey dinner, complete with all the trimmings, that was fit for the gods. A great deal of love and skill go into planning and preparing such a meal in order that the end result has home-cooked goodness rather than institutional flavour. The turkeys, as always, were donated by the people of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

A similar dinner is planned for Friday, December 15th in anticipation of Christmas. A further Christmas celebration occurs on Friday, December 22nd. It is an amazing day which brings together the amazing grace of so many people from the community. Members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society provide and serve about 375 individual Mary Brown Fried Chicken and Tater Dinners and clean the premises before leaving late in the afternoon. Members of the I.O.D.E. buy winter gloves for everyone. Patti Carlisle (St. John's Church) and her many helpers buy and wrap gifts for over 300 people. Other volunteers wrap donated gloves, mitts, scarves, and toques for each person. Santa Claus arrives around 10:00 AM and distributes the waiting gifts. Like everyone else, everywhere, we won't see him for another year.



We celebrate birthdays whenever we get a chance. The week-old chocolate or vanilla cakes donated by grocery stores and stored in the freezer until needed, the candles which are saved and reused and the motley voices trying to sing the birthday song don't add up to a very fancy party. But they seem to suit our simple style and they do bring face-splitting smiles of delight to the celebrated person.

We applaud and rejoice when someone gets a job, finishes a course, graduates, or gives birth to a baby. These are the little things that draw us together, add interest, and a little excitement to everyone's life.

The Volunteers

There is no such thing as a typical volunteer at St. John's Kitchen. Most days will find teenaged, middle-aged, and senior men and women working together around the kitchen table peeling vegetables, making sandwiches, preparing soup, frying potatoes, or doing dishes while sharing stories, telling jokes, singing, or whistling. It's never quiet and it's always a happy place. Many volunteers are retired people who want to do something worthwhile with their time. They bring skills and experiences that are invaluable to our work. Some volunteers are unemployed people who also want to spend their time in a way that counts. They show up each day to wash dishes, mop floors, and do whatever the moment requires. Many are students whose university or high school programs require that they gain community experience.

We were immensely grateful on one recent day for the mathematical ability of one of these students. Two major meal items that required milk were being prepared concurrently. Macaroni and cheese casserole called for 27 cups of milk while pumpkin squares called for 16 cups. Somehow the quantities got reversed. You can imagine what this did to the pumpkin mixture! It was very runny. But Sandra came to the rescue. She figured that if all other ingredients were multiplied by 69% all would be well. A trip to the store for an additional 11 cans of pumpkin with suitable multiplication of other ingredients and we soon had an extra-large batch of perfect filling for Pumpkin squares which were delicious and a hit with everyone (recipe is available on request).

On that same day a middle-aged couple that we had never met came in because they needed lunch. It was their first ever visit and as soon as they had eaten, they rose



from their chairs and proceeded to clear tables and stack dishes. Since they were doing all this work, Gretchen asked who they were. They explained that they had recently lost their jobs and needed a good meal but wanted to do something for it. They stayed until all the work was done and later asked for the recipe for that “excellent” dessert.

The People of St. John’s Kitchen

Ahhhh, the people! It would be hard to find a more natural, humorous bunch of people all together in one place. For four hours each day the gym is filled with happy chatter, laughter, lively music, and singing. Euchre, cribbage, and chess are favourite games. A lot of affectionate teasing and joking and hugging go on. In contrast to the isolation that the poor feel from the rest of society, amongst themselves there is a remarkable sense of community. It is a privilege to be included within that community and to experience first-hand the remarkable resourcefulness, courage, hard work, effort, perseverance, wisdom, and optimism. Cynicism, fear, and anger are present as well, but what all share is a common wish to be responded to as human beings, not simply as victims or poverty statistics.

An interesting thing has been happening recently. We have a plastic box that sits on our meal service table each day so that those who wish to, and are able to, have the option of contributing for their daily meal. These miscellaneous donations have averaged \$100 monthly over the past few years. However, in the last few months (coincident with the news that our government grant would be wiped out) donations have climbed to \$150 monthly. These donations are made up of pennies, nickels, dimes, etc. and a rare bill. They come from people who are penniless by the middle of every month. Is this mere coincidence or is it a gift? I believe it is a generous gift since I am so clearly reminded of the Widow’s Mite.

A Time and a Place of Incarnation and Hope

What better place to experience the Incarnation of God and to celebrate hope than in this room where life goes on each day in the face of tremendous hardship? Simple human needs for good food, clothing, haircuts, footcare, and celebration are easy to fill. Random acts of kindness and shared work fill hearts with joy and gratitude. St.



Theresa of Avila has said, “God calls us not to do great things but to do little things with great love.”

While it is true that much more is needed to address bigger issues of the structural causes of poverty or the injustice of deep cuts being made to programs that serve the poor, these little acts are necessary, they are doable, and they are real in daily lives. They remind us of a humble birth that still has the power to change the world. May that birth and life take place in your heart this day.



Honourable Woman

Issue 44, March 1996

What would Kitchener-Waterloo ever do without Anna Kaljas and her family? This extraordinary woman has filled the most elemental needs for food, shelter, love, and warmth of the most disadvantaged and neglected people in our cities throughout more than forty years. In her own words, she and her daughter-in-law Maggie provide “everything a normal mother does in a house, a nurse does in a hospital, and a cook does in the kitchen for society's misfits no one else gives a hoot about”. The “family” of twenty adults, who are now sheltered in two houses on Frederick Street, would have nowhere to go if Anna were ever to retire and close up shop. They are ex-psychiatric patients who have been discharged into the community, but who are unable to care for themselves or to fit into other shelters. She affectionately calls them her “goofballs” and they affectionately call her “Mom.”

Anna's service to the community has evolved and changed over time, always in response to perceived needs, lived experiences, and reflection upon these. In 1954, while working as a Registered Nursing Assistant at K-W Hospital, Anna bought her first house at 277 Frederick Street and opened her doors to immigrants. She herself had been a refugee for a number of years following the takeover of her native Estonia by Russia after World War II. She knew what it was to be a “person with no place to go,” then commonly called a Displaced Person. One of her first guests was Eric who emigrated from Austria and who subsequently became her husband of forty years until his death two years ago. She fondly reminisces that “he came for shelter and forgot to leave.” They shared a love for art, theatre, music, a simple lifestyle, and hard work on behalf of others.

Over the years Anna has owned as many as five houses on the corner of Frederick and Simeon Streets near downtown Kitchener and, as different needs arose, has provided temporary homes to teenagers in trouble, drug addicts, alcoholics, and ex-convicts. Thousands of people have Anna to thank for sheltering them when they most needed it. Some have died, some have married, some still maintain contact, and two are now working in Correctional Services.



But it is for those whom she feels are society's neediest people, people with psychiatric illnesses, that she now concentrates her love and energy on. Her concern is to provide the most stable and supportive environment possible to people who do not have the ability to function normally. Her home has become their permanent home where an attempt is made to normalize life with a minimum of rules and red tape. Everyone is encouraged to help around the home but no one is forced to do work that they don't want to do.

Anna, at 84, has "retired" to a four day week and is driven to her Moorfield area farm every Monday by her son Peter. There she does laundry for the houses, stores food in the cold room, and does canning and preserving in summer and fall. Maggie takes charge of the houses in the city during the week. Seven days a week these two women prepare three meals per day, shop for food, dispense all prescribed medications and spending money, and respond to the many needs of their little community. Their work brings them in regular contact with mental health personnel, hospital, police, ambulance staff, coroners, and court officials.



Rooted in Community

These are heroic tasks and the Kaljases are heroic people, although they would not describe themselves that way. Anna has received many awards, including the Order of Canada, and has been featured in newspapers and magazine articles, on CBC television, and in a play. But a visit to the Kaljas home will find them steadily going about the necessary tasks of day-to-day living. Anna, herself, is a very colourful, expressive but unselfconscious woman who immediately puts a person at ease with her familiar "Hello, dearie, would you like a cup of coffee?" Maggie brings a friendly,



efficient, and gentle presence to the house, its inhabitants, and visitors. Anna's son, Peter, owns and operates Kaljas Landscaping but also devotes time and energy toward their homes. One senses strong family bonds as well as a strong commitment to the community.

Gregory Baum, in the foreword to *The Working Centre: Experiment in Social Change* says: "What I admire – and where I see God's hand – is that the social movements at the base continue to be bearers of a utopian vision, the vision of a peaceful, cooperative society where all can eat and where all can be friends. My hope is that in the present culture of anti-solidarity, the efforts of these communities will not only help a growing number of people to live a life of dignity in difficult circumstances, but also promote a countercultural under-current in society spreading the ideals of cooperation and solidarity."

Personalism

Anna Kaljas saw a glaring need in the community and has taken action. She decries bureaucracy and red tape, choosing instead the more human response of meeting simple daily needs in a direct and personal way. Anna has opened up her own home, her private space, to a host of strangers on a day-to-day, year-in, year-out basis. She and they have become immersed in each other's lives, thereby creating a community where cooperation and solidarity are paramount. This is what makes her so extraordinary. Very few of us would be able to live this way. But she is happy. Her house rings with laughter and her boisterous voice. Apart from a "little arthritis in her knees" which has forced her to reduce the size of her farm garden, she is not apparently bothered with the usual constraints of aging. She is still capable, at 84, of a good day's work. She might long ago have really retired to her farm, 7 ½ acres on the edge of a river, "where all my dreams are", but she is called back over and over again to those who need her. She has rooted herself firmly in this community and she knows she is needed in an era where so many people feel useless and redundant.

It seems fitting that this community should recognize her invaluable contribution to its well-being.

We are pleased to pay tribute to Anna Kaljas at the Ninth Annual Mayors' Dinner. Anna offers shelter, food, and special care for people with psychiatric problems. Anna's deep commitment to personally care for some of our society's most disadvantaged people makes her an excellent choice for this year's Guest of Honour.



Embracing Simplicity

Issue 45, June 1996



Making Changes

Every Tuesday, since last October when funding cuts were announced, Chris, Jack, Catherine, Margaret, and I have been meeting at 7:30 A.M. in the Fireside Room at St. John's Church for an hour of spiritual exercise and quiet meditation. Then from 8:30 until the workday begins at 9:00, we share breakfast and conversation upstairs at St. John's Kitchen. Everyone is welcome.

We meet because we believe that there needs to be creative and caring ways of coping with the funding cuts that are undermining needed services and threatening the well-being and the futures of more and more people.

We meet because we believe that good decision making and planning require time for calmness and reflection. It seems that many workers today experience stress and anxiety in their jobs and in their lives. When this happens and when there is no time for reflection, compassion and caring are often pushed to the margins. Good decisions arise from wisdom which only comes from reflection.

We meet because we feel the need to pause long enough and to quiet ourselves sufficiently to be able to distinguish what is truly valuable in our daily experiences from what is superfluous.

We meet because we need to increase our awareness of where community-building values are practiced and because we need to see more clearly the signs of hope.



Community Values

“Every new venture needs a little grey hair”. This is the premise that led Jean to offer her services at an affordable rate to a new young company seeking to grow their small local business and bring new life to a tired but promising part of town. Jean is a middle aged woman who knows what it is to start a business from scratch and to keep it going. This is what she did most of her life until marriage breakdown and sudden financial difficulties led her to a new city and down a new path.

She is building a new life for herself here in Kitchener and she brings an amazing treasure chest of skills, resources, strengths and values with her. In the two years since she has lived here Jean has set down roots, presently lives in her daughter's home, providing child care for her granddaughter, working at numerous part-time temporary jobs, and getting to know her neighbourhood and her neighbours. She spends time at The Working Centre preparing her resume and enhancing her computer skills. About six months ago her path led her to St. John's Kitchen to volunteer.

Jean brought skills and a spirit that enriches all that we try to do. Her wonderful sense of humour, good down home common sense and personal well-being radiate and contribute well-being, in turn, to the community in which she finds herself. Jean's goals are lofty but simple; to participate in meaningful constructive work, to be connected to the neighbourhood, and to arrive at the financial level of independence that will allow a reasonable, but not extravagant, lifestyle. She has known material riches and learned from experience that they can be fleeting and unfulfilling. She is now building other treasures; sufficiency, neighbourliness, sharing meaningful work, and wisdom. Her friendship is a joy!

Good Work

Rob, is a person who makes a difference. He has not been able to find steady employment in years, but he strings together part-time jobs, volunteer work, and job search efforts into a day that has healthy structure and profound meaning. He is well educated, has many skills, and is an avid reader. Rob can make books and authors come alive and he is a living example of how good literature can create, feed, and nurture the human spirit. In describing the Master Mariner by Nicholas Monsarrat,



Rob says: "I have been on the open sea, to the Caribbean, to Trafalgar, and to Quebec without ever leaving Kitchener. A book well written, will take you with it; so all you have to do is go on board and live with it."

Rob can be counted on to appear at St. John's Kitchen every day to help with the end of the day clean-up and to mop the floors. He takes pride in doing the job well and we are grateful. It's a special treat on a day when he has time to come in for an early morning coffee and chat – about books, more often than not!

His volunteer work also includes computer programming, data entry, and registration of artifacts for a local low-budget museum. This is unpaid work but Rob's reward is knowing that the most often used program is the one he developed as a volunteer. In Rob's own words: "This is useful, satisfying work. I just enjoy doing it. It is a good use of my time."

Rob maintains close ties with his only brother and family, and with his mother who lives out West. He budgets throughout the year for a visit to his mother, usually on Mother's Day. But this year he will wait until August so that they can celebrate his 50th and her 75th birthdays together.

Rob's lifestyle and his outlook on life are an inspiration. He says: "I like the break-even philosophy. I think that I can do well with it. I don't need much to live on." When I asked him if an annual earned income of fifteen thousand dollars would sustain him, he replied: "That would allow me to live well. My life is rich and full as long as I don't waste my time – whether I'm getting paid for it or not." He values the experience of doing volunteer work as long as time permits. His work is a gift to St. John's Kitchen. He claims that: "Even if I had money, I'd still be here. It's the people I meet who make it worthwhile." Those are reassuring words when you know that Rob's steady efforts will likely result in increased hours of paid work in the future. Whether Rob continues to volunteer at St. John's Kitchen or not, it is enough to know that we live in the same community.

Joyful, Simple Living

I often look to Debbie and Andy for the inspiration to appreciate what I have. They are a younger couple who have known a lot of hardship and heartbreak in their lives.



They were forced to give up their severely handicapped first-born child because they did not have the resources to give him the life-long care that he would require. Nonetheless, they maintain contact with his caregivers and, in many ways, he will always be a part of their lives. They, along with their second child, an eleven year-old boy, are a strong and mutually supportive family.

Andy takes whatever work he can find and sometimes travels many miles on his bike to do seasonal farm work, landscaping, moving, or construction. Debbie has recently completed a bookkeeping course and would love to find office work. In the meantime they shovel driveways together, cut grass, and do yard work wherever it is available. Debbie is unfailingly supportive of her young son's school activities and monitors his homework. Their family spends a lot of time together.

What is most obvious about Debbie and Andy is their constant good cheer and sense of gratitude. They truly appreciate and enjoy the rhythm in their lives that gets them up together every morning, to see their son off to school, to look for work for the day and to stop for lunch at St. John's Kitchen. Their income fluctuates each month and it requires careful budgeting. There is no money for frills but they almost always manage to pay their bills. The work that they do is hard, physical labour but it is useful and helps others. There is a dignity in their lives and they are a cheerful and friendly presence in the community.

Hope Found in Community

Jean, Rob, Debbie, and Andy (not their real names) are only four representatives of the many generous people whom we meet daily. The details of their individual lives differ, but they share a common spirit. It seems as though gratitude and simplicity are what fuel their generosity and community-mindedness. It also makes them hopeful people. They have found creative ways to live well with reduced incomes. Indeed, they point the way to what is essential and valuable and what is mere frills. These are the skills and the qualities that need to be held up, encouraged, and spread around!



Reflections on Community

Issue 46, September 1996

Learning from the tough times

There were two fights at St. John's Kitchen this morning. One involved physical force and the other involved equally hurtful verbal force. Fortunately, fights are few and far between and are usually short lived. A more long term reality involves the few people we meet in the course of a day whose fragile mental and emotional state causes them severe stress which they may express in harsh words, cutting criticism, degrading name calling, and angry behaviour aimed at any of us.

All of these incidents certainly upset the otherwise calm, friendly, and non-threatening environment of St. John's Kitchen. We are momentarily shaken up, and may even feel personally hurt or offended when anything out of the ordinary happens. It is incidents such as these which pose many questions. How does one react when a person disturbs the peace, creates chaos, and upsets the comfort levels of everyone else? A very human response, though definitely not a helpful one, is to retaliate with more harsh words and threats. An easy solution, too, is to call the police, get rid of the offenders and to even ban them from re-entry. These solutions alleviate the immediate problem and give everyone some breathing space and a chance to recover equilibrium. But as a long term strategy they seem somewhat empty and impoverished.

We are, after all and above all, trying through daily efforts and prayer to build a sense of community among all of us who spend our days at St. John's Kitchen. We have, as our intention, to create a safe place where people can come, not only to get a nourishing meal, but also to participate and to find support, encouragement, and food for the spirit. We know that the bodies and spirits of people who are marginalized are assaulted in so many ways by poor living conditions, poor nutrition, and isolation. We know that being dependent on the good will of others and of services and organizations for survival is so often degrading and destructive to self-esteem. We sense very strongly that hostility and anger are most often the result of all these things.



It seems apparent that services and programs, though they provide partial relief from some hardships, don't provide lasting solutions. They most often fail to lift the human spirit. And, anyway, many institutions are floundering as a result of decreased funding. Services have proliferated and become so expensive that the state can no longer afford them. John McKnight, in *The Careless Society* says: "While we have reached the limits of institutional problem-solving, we are only at the beginning of exploring the possibility of a new vision for community."

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker houses, says that "community is all of us together, trying to be of help to each other. We are all relatives, kinfolk, some would say: those who receive, give; and those who give, receive." This is the reality that we most often see at St. John's Kitchen. There are so many people, each and every day, who give of themselves in so many ways – the work of their hands, the daily greetings, the jokes and laughter, the hugs and good wishes. These gifts far outweigh the fights or angry words. Even so, Dorothy Day, ever the radical thinker, says that the fights are a gift too. They let off steam, they clear the air, and create momentary silence in a room filled with constant chatter. They also bring to our attention persons who may be in need of extra care and love.

Tools for community building

We have observed over the years that we influence the environment by our attitudes and by the way we regard each other. If we are mistrustful of everyone, we create tension in the air and increase the likelihood of fights. If we are friendly and trusting, everyone is more at ease. We are all vulnerable people and when our insecurities and prejudices get in the way, we become defensive and aren't really free to support others in their struggle. It is in the daily give and take of community life that we come to know ourselves better and to acknowledge our own weaknesses. It is also in these daily encounters that we come to know others better and to see their gifts. Reflection and prayer are powerful tools in this life-long endeavour. They gave rise to The Working Centre and its ongoing work, including St. John's Kitchen, many years ago. They sustain its vision of small, local communities.

It is interesting that John McKnight, who advocates small local communities as alternatives to services, points out that Christ, at the Last Supper, said, 'no longer do



I call you servants[...] I call you friends.' McKnight adds: 'Friends are people who know, care, respect, struggle, love justice, and have a commitment to each other through time.' It was fun to be around The Working Centre in early August when Joe and Stephanie and their children were away in Nova Scotia at a family reunion. Volunteers maintained the daily life and work, expressed concern about their safety, and anticipated their return to a birthday celebration for Stephanie and three year-old Thomas. Their love for this family was very touching.

The growth of community

A small and caring community has evolved in downtown Kitchener around The Working Centre and it flows back and forth between there and St. John's Kitchen. It includes people from many walks of life who work, support each other, and celebrate together. When anyone is missing for more than a day, others begin inquiring about their whereabouts and their well-being. When anyone is having a bad day, others pick up the slack. Although Joe and Stephanie assume responsibility for what goes on, they do not seek to control. They share time, conversation, and daily work with everyone. Everyone's ideas are valued, and discussion, as well as initiative, is encouraged and recognized.

The gift of community

It is such a gift to be part of the crew who perform the many tasks necessary at St. John's Kitchen each day to serve a meal and then to clean up at day's end. Miraculously there are always just the right number of working hands. Each person knows what needs to be done and sets about doing it. No matter what has happened during the day, the work always gets completed and the day ends on a high note. At the end of the day, forgiveness and reconciliation have quite often happened. It is a gratitude-making place!

COMMUNITY



**BLOSSOMS AND
FLOURISHES
AT ST. JOHN'S KITCHEN**

GRACE



**BLOSSOMS AND
FLOURISHES
AT ST. JOHN'S KITCHEN**



A Lively Season

Issue 47, December 1996

Season's Greetings! This has been an exceptionally lively season at St. John's Kitchen. It began in September with the arrival of students from area high schools, universities, seminaries, and bible colleges seeking to enrich their education with practical experience or simply wanting to use their time helping others. Many of them are studying Hospitality and Food Services, Sociology, or Religion. St. John's Kitchen is a natural place for field work in these areas. It provides an opportunity for hands-on experience preparing large quantities of food and a chance to encounter people who openly share their experiences and means of coping with life despite many hardships.

Throughout October we hosted over one hundred visitors from the community during the second "Soup, Sandwiches and Street Sensitivity" program. This program, planned jointly by a number of community workers, is intended to sensitize area residents to the issues of homelessness and poverty. It accomplished this and much more. Our circle of friends and supporters was enlarged. We now know someone who is willing to supply us with spices, another person who can supply coffee, and a pianist who arrived one recent evening with his portable keyboard and entertained us throughout a special fundraising dinner. Other friends drop in regularly to deliver filled coin cans or rolls of pennies and a few groceries that they have collected and to say hello.

We were also visited by a group from the Interfaith Movement for Social Justice, a class from the Lutheran Seminary studying Canadian Liberation Theology, social agencies, business people, pastors, politicians, reporters, and many others. One first-time visiting pastor commented, moments after stepping into the room: "I can feel the friendliness and comfort in the air. This is a good place to be."

On October 23rd, the Kitchener Downtown Business Association hosted a first time fashion show/brown bag lunch at the nearby City Hall with proceeds going to St. John's Kitchen. This was also an awareness raiser. One can hope that out of these experiences, a growing sense of compassion, neighbourliness, and responsibility will



flourish across the community. Several requests by area churches for speakers seem to reflect a desire to become informed about the issues and to reach out to others.

Thanksgiving dinner for almost 300 people was a special feature of October as well. A great team of people worked hard in the kitchen for several days to prepare and serve this feast which, as always, was sponsored by St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

October ended on a very high note with a successful Pizza Supper and Benefit Concert in support of The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen. This, too, was the work of many willing hands and generated wonderful community support.

The first week of November is unique. The 49th Annual St. John's Church Pudding Factory moves into the kitchen and gym/dining hall. Bag lunches, rather than the usual hot meal, are given out to all who need them. This year was special, however. It takes many hands to produce the annual 3,000 pounds of Christmas puddings which raise funds for the charitable works of St. John's Church. This year church workers and clergy were helped by several St. John's Kitchen volunteers. "We couldn't have done it without them," was the comment of the church workers whose numbers diminish each year. If this tradition is to continue, it might mean that we can look forward to future years in which our two groups can work ever more closely in mutually supportive roles.

About fifteen eager bakers participated in a successful Break Bakefest on Wednesday, November 13th. The smell of white and whole wheat bread, challah and Chelsea buns filled the air while we enjoyed a light supper. A Christmas Bakefest is planned for Wednesday, December 4th from 2 to 6 P.M. and all are welcome. We have all the ingredients needed and want to share them with others.

We are planning similar cooking fests for January 15th, February 12th, and March 12th, 1997.

Coin cans are now being delivered to churches and schools throughout the city in time for Advent. These are filled by caring parishioners and school children as part of their Advent preparations and are returned to us in January. This event involves



many volunteer hours on the telephone seeking support and much time spent labeling, packaging, and delivering the cans.

Throughout December we will be preparing for Christmas. Although a Christmas tree, practical gifts for everyone, and celebratory dinners are part of these preparations, maintaining our awareness of the loneliness that Christmas brings to many people is especially important.

This desire and need to be present with and responsive to our brothers and sisters and to the world around us is what draws a few of us together every Tuesday at 7:30 A.M. in the Fireside Room at St. John's Church to pray and to meditate. We are looking for more interested people to join us.

We are also looking for a "laundry angel." That is, someone who would pick up one load of aprons, towels, and dishrags at St. John's Kitchen once a week, launder and return them the following week. No ironing required! Just drop in or call us at 745-8928.

Day after day, while all of these busy activities are going on, faithful volunteers carry on with the real work that makes St. John's Kitchen hum along. 1,300 buns are buttered, 800 sandwiches made, 100 gallons of soup, 600 main courses and 1,300 servings of dessert are prepared every week. And, of course, stacks of dishes get done, and floors, cupboards, sinks, coolers, and washrooms are cleaned daily. I am reminded of the words written by Mike Barretta in the September 1996 issue of this newspaper (p. 5). He might have been describing the St. John's Kitchen volunteers. "No weight is too heavy, no job too hard, no time spent too long. These are a people to whom work is holy, and the pride they put in their work is to be admired."

Participation in the life of St. John's Kitchen is growing and is expanding to include more individuals and more diverse groups all the time. Whether our friends and supporters work directly at the kitchen to prepare the daily meal, or whether they work unseen in the background, they are the wonderful signs of home that enliven St. John's Kitchen year round.

May hope live in all our hearts during this and every season.



Good Change

Issue 48, March 1997



“I really look forward to coming in each day.” “I really enjoy the work that I do and the time that I spend here.” “I feel that we are just one big happy family.” These were the comments made at the annual dinner on February 18th which celebrated the volunteers at St. John's Kitchen. We have been blessed throughout our twelve years with committed and generous people who freely give their time to prepare a daily meal and perform associated tasks.

But a quiet and slow revolution is occurring at St. John's Kitchen. Little by little, the work is being assumed by people who, themselves, have a need for the daily meal. Most days, they outnumber other volunteers and have become full participants in the daily life of the kitchen.

About 12 people are required daily to prepare, cook, and serve the meal and then to clear and restore the premises for the evening and week-end use of St. John's Congregation. For the first few years in the life of St. John's Kitchen, work was almost exclusively the domain of paid staff and volunteers from the churches and the community. Only occasionally did patrons help out. The kitchen area was strictly off-limits to everyone except those people either preparing the meal or doing the dishes. Trays of food were passed through a window to those who needed a meal and who were confined to the gym/dining area. There was very little chance for interaction between the two groups. As a matter of fact, there were almost palpable



barriers between them. The food was healthy and wholesome but the environment in which it was eaten, unfortunately, was more likely to breed fear, suspicion, condescension, and mistrust.

Small, cumulative changes in our way of doing things are effecting a change in the relationships between previously differentiated groups. Establishing a serving table in the dining area was the first step taken to bring people closer to each other and to encourage familiarity and affection. The telephone, located in the kitchen and previously reserved for business calls, is now shared by all. Workers frequently eat their meal in the common dining area rather than in the kitchen. Frequent visitors from all walks of life share a meal and stories with people on low income and gain new understanding. These are but a few of many small measures, intentional or incidental, which have created an environment in which it is easier for all people to offer their time and skills and for all people to come to know each other.

This gathering place is gradually becoming the community that it was originally intended to be – a place where people challenge and learn from each other, where they face and support each other over time in all their human variety, good parts, bad parts, and all the rest. A volunteer appreciation dinner has now become an authentic celebration of shared life at the Kitchen.



Searching for Small Steps that Make A Difference

Issue 49, June 1997

Some Realities of Poverty

Poverty in Ontario is a reality. In her book *Dispatches from the Poverty Line*, Pat Capponi has given a clear and personal account of her own experience. This very readable book is available at local bookstores. If you are at all interested in learning about the concerns and conditions of a significant number of our fellow citizens, you will find this book very helpful. I highly recommend it to everyone.

In the preface, Capponi writes about the "closed circle" that almost all poor people find themselves in; "They only know others in the same circumstances, people who can not even provide temporary relief from their empty pockets and empty shelves."

Capponi herself moves between two different worlds. She is educated, articulate, and has supportive friends. She has published two books and has had meaningful paid work with some benefits until recently when "the provincial election, and the new premier, and the clawbacks, and the freeze and the dismantling" changed it all.

What began as a journal of her first four months of decreasing and depleting savings and increasing poverty, soon became a magazine article, and finally a book. Her writing and other activities are the tools which she uses "to search for ways to bring two different worlds together." (preface)

I experienced these two different worlds within the same hour one recent evening and I have not been able to forget it. I traveled to Ottawa in May to attend the Annual Nurses' Alumnae Dinner at the Chateau Laurier. It was a delightful evening, of course, the surroundings were sumptuous, the food was exquisite and plentiful, the drinks were readily available, the service was impeccable and, of course, the reunion with long time friends was exciting and supportive. When the evening ended, I walked for about ten minutes with friends, through the nearby market area, to the garage where we had left our car. Elevators were closed down by that time of



the night so we had to take the stairway to get to the fifth floor where we had parked. I was totally unprepared for what I saw next. We had to step over people at each level as we made our way to the top. There were one, and sometimes two, people sleeping on each landing! I tried very hard not to disturb anyone because I had the distinct feeling that I was invading their privacy and walking through their bedroom, such as it was.

This is but one visible example of poverty in our country today. Until I encountered it head on, I did not fully grasp the depths of it. I am quite sure that these sleepers would have to rise very early in the morning in order to escape eviction by security guards clearing the way for daytime users of the parking garage. Where would they go? Breakfast or even just a cup of coffee would be out of the question unless they were prepared to walk miles to the Shepherds of Good Hope Kitchen in another part of the city. I can't even imagine a remedy to the plight of these poor people. I can only imagine what might have happened in their lives, between birth and now, to bring them to these sorry circumstances. Certainly they didn't choose this lifestyle! It might be too late for any significant improvement in their lives, but it can't be too late to prevent this from happening to babies being born now in our country.

Local Realities

And it isn't too late to make a difference in the lives of some people, especially single mothers, whom we have met lately at St. John's Kitchen. "Susan" described the plight of many women whose support payments from the fathers of their children have been recently diverted out of the local community and through a very slow process at Queen's Park. They and their children live in constant fear of eviction because the rent cheque is late; they live with an almost ever-present hunger because money to buy food has not arrived; the self-esteem and performance of school age children falls apart because they cannot afford the school trips, extra-curricular activities, decent lunches, or the wardrobes of their peers. And women who want to work either can't afford transportation, suitable wardrobes, day-care for their children, or can't find a job.

They don't ask for much. They would like understanding, unconditional friendship, and a place to talk to others. They would appreciate relief from some of their



shortages once in a while. But so often when they seek help, they encounter judgement, criticism, mean-spiritedness, and even cruelty. These are things that can be changed and improved.

Right Relations

Elizabeth A. Johnson, in *Freeing Theology* (Harper Collins, 1993), shows that “the passion of God is clearly directed toward the lifting of social oppression and the establishing of right relations.” This might be said to be the passion also of a small but growing number of people in Kitchener-Waterloo and elsewhere who are meeting regularly and more often than ever before. They meet because they believe that the government deficit reduction tactics target the wrong people – those who are already poor and powerless. They meet because they begin to suspect that big institutions, meant to improve the quality of life have instead become top-heavy, expensive to maintain, impersonal, inefficient, and even detrimental to social and personal well-being. They meet because of a dawning awareness that the enriched and extravagant lifestyle of a dominant few people are a burden on the earth and on those less fortunate throughout the world. They meet in order to support one another in their belief that there is a better and more just way to live and that together they can discern it.

Small Freeing Steps

Some are beginning to make choices and to take small personal steps which they hope will make a difference in their communities.

- Members of the Interfaith Movement for Social Justice have chosen to donate their tax cuts to non-profit agencies and are urging others to do the same.
- ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Committee) is holding hearings across the province to facilitate encounters and story-telling between poor people and leaders from the community.
- Members of the Hamilton Diocesan Social Justice Committee have worked hard to advance guidelines in support of a simple, non-consumerist lifestyle and are themselves living these guidelines.
- Educators for Social Justice is a small group, open to anyone, which meets bi-weekly at The Working Centre to support each other in reducing



dependency on consumer goods and in making other lifestyle changes. Their meetings are reflective and substantive but are made lively by the presence of the members' children.

- A couple of households within the city have offered garden space for apartment dwellers who want to grow some of their own food.
- A doctor and students provide affordable eye care and eyeglasses to people on limited incomes.
- A barber offers free haircuts for those who cannot otherwise afford them.

Some people are substituting healthier foods for meat, buying more from local markets and farmers and preparing their own babies' foods.

Some people are sharing their homes with others who are temporarily in need of shelter.

Some young families are making a choice to live on one income in order to have a parent home with the children.

Some people are making a choice to share one job when circumstances permit, thus freeing up work for another person.

Some are reducing, at least slightly, their dependence on cars.

Some are turning off or getting rid of their television sets in order to retreat from the dominant culture of consumerism and violence. They are choosing, instead, to read books, have conversations and get-togethers with neighbours and family, do crafts, and support local public events.

Some, whose chosen simple lifestyle requires very little income are donating time, language, and other skills to ease the transition of refugees into their new homeland.

Making a Difference

The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen actively support all of these groups and individuals and their initiatives. This means that we have been to a lot of meetings during the past few months. It even seems sometimes that there is time for very little else.



But participation in these gatherings is a productive activity in itself. There is something new within these meetings. People are coming together as equals; they are bringing with them a commitment to each other and to their local community; they are bringing more questions than answers and they are searching out possibilities together.

In addition to talking and sharing they are actually doing things which require sacrifice. They are discovering that they are not powerless; that small personal acts can make a difference. And they are beginning to feel growing support for their alternative choices. There is a life-giving freshness when individuals begin to examine their own lifestyles and make visible changes. They have become educated and informed about the causes and sources of social oppression and are striving mightily to no longer be complicit in these.

It might readily be said that their passion, like God's, has become "directed toward the lifting of social oppression and the establishing of right relations."



Blessings that Make the Gift of Christmas Last All Year Round

Issue 51, December 1997

- The wonderful sounds of happy chatter and laughter of people from all walks of life and circumstances working together.
- The beautiful sight of people of all ages working closely together and sharing common interests.
- The wonderful smell of soups, stews, sauces, and roasts simmering each day for the nourishment and delight of a large gathering of people.
- The variety of tastes introduced to the menu by the generous skills of Spanish, Polish, Italian, and Northern Ontario volunteer cooks.
- The creative and innovative use of donated foods to make delectable meals. Chick-pea sauce on pasta comes to mind. If you haven't tried it, it's healthy and very tasty!
- The teamwork of volunteer dishwashers who whistle and sing as they work. Most of the tunes are recognizable old standards but some of the lyrics are spontaneous and original.
- The wonderful diversity of people who have come from all across our great country and other parts of the world to make Kitchener their home and St. John's Kitchen their community.
- The daily workers - Gretchen, Don, Rick, Eleanor, Alex, Maxine, and Gladys - who open the doors in the morning and polish things off at the end of each day.
- The weekly volunteers who bring a unique flavor and personality to each day.
- The students from local schools who volunteer service hours, come to learn skills, and to meet other people in their community.
- The generous individuals, churches, schools, and other groups who support us all year long.



- The farmers and gardeners who fill our tables and our freezers with quality produce in the fall.
- The Food Bank people who gather and supply us with food throughout the year.
- The special visitors who want to make our acquaintance or who choose an alternative way of celebrating a birthday or anniversary.
- Agencies and groups who are a resource we can turn to when special needs crop up, who provide, prepare, and serve an occasional meal; and who fill our stockings at Christmas time.
- A local grocer who regularly supplies canned goods and who can always be counted on for the makings of a fresh salad when we need to round out a meal.
- The two laundry angels who were on our Christmas wish list last year.
- The staff and members of St. John's Church whose generous sharing of space and daily prayers sustain us.
- The Board of Directors of The Working Centre whose commitment and vision supports and inspires us.
- The enthusiastic and supportive friends at The Working Centre whose trust, frequent visits, and appreciation encourage us.
- Above all, the over two hundred people who come to St. John's Kitchen each day whose daily strength, courage, and perseverance humbles us; and whose expressions of gratitude, stories of success: "I got my Grade 12", "I'm going back to school", "I found an apartment", "I got a job", "I got custody of my son" warm our hearts every day.
- Each day at St. John's Kitchen is fresh, each day tells its own story, each day brings new lessons, new struggles, new triumphs, and a chance for new birth.
- St. John's Kitchen Christmas Wish List.
- Success for our newest project, a St. John's Kitchen Community Garden in a large space donated by a thoughtful family in Mannheim. We already have a keen and energetic volunteer project coordinator and offers to plough and prepare the land from surrounding farmers. Our plan is to add organically



grown produce to our menus and to share part of the harvest among those who volunteer to do the work.

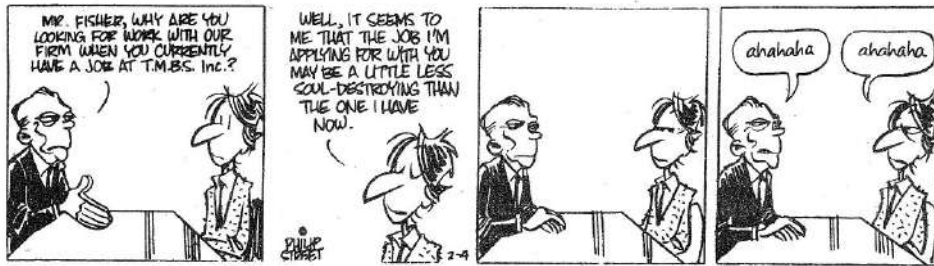
- The occasional services of a hair cutting angel.
- The return of our wonderful "Foot Lady".
- Accessible shower and laundry facilities for street people.
- Adequate and broader recognition of the very real value of the work and skills donated in the community by people who can't find paid jobs.
- Expanding general awareness and gratitude for the lack of negative impact that poor people have on our planet. They either walk everywhere, ride bicycles, or use public transit. They do not drive cars and therefore, do not contribute to pollution. They are not great consumers of over packaged goods. They are great recyclers – of used clothing, used furniture, and of food resulting from overproduction. They send very little to our landfill sites and consume little energy with few appliances. What little money they have is spent in the local community. They know what it means to reduce, reuse, and recycle.
- A greater sharing of the earth's abundant resources among all people.
- Kind, thoughtful, strong, and wise leaders.
- Blessings and peace to all of our wonderful supporters.
- And, above all, in the hearts of all people, love and joy that lasts all year round.



Hope in Small Daily Happenings

Issue 52, March 1998

FISHER



Have you heard about the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, MAI for short? This is a treaty which if ratified, will expand the investment and business privileges of corporations throughout the world while drastically reducing the rights of Canadian and other governments to impose any control over the practices of these businesses. The popular media gives us little to no information about it, but the implications are frightening. It will affect all of our lives but will be devastating to the growing number of poor people. And, closer to home, Bill 42, "The Welfare Bill" will soon be passed in the Ontario Legislature. Subsistence level incomes will be lowered even further. Some low incomes are being wiped out entirely. The proposed shelter allowance will come nowhere near the cost of shelter. What does one say to a middle-aged single woman who wanders into St. John's Kitchen in the middle of the month and tells you that she has no money and no place to sleep that night?

These are very tough issues. The last one, of course requires an immediate response and sometimes that response can be very inadequate and provide merely a temporary solution. It is an indication of the larger issues though.

While it is very important to be supporting the growing groups of people both locally and across the country who are mobilizing to confront these devastating decisions, it



seems important also to take note of the small signs of hope and individual stories of encouragement wherever we can.

Abundance

A first ever Boxing Day Supper was provided at First United Church for all those who were alone or without a meal on this day. The word ABUNDANT best describes this event. There was an abundance of food, there was an abundance of volunteer church members, there was entertainment, and after the initial shy feelings, there was an abundance of fellowship, goodwill, friendliness, and cheer. Two groups of people who, under normal circumstances, would never meet each other, spent a merry day together. Two sets of needs were filled; the need to reach outside of oneself and give, and the need for food and warmth. Both groups fed each other. No one can say what difference was made that day at the personal level of individual lives, but we do know that a desire to repeat the experience has been expressed. It will take shape next month when volunteers from the church will cook and serve a meal at St. John's Kitchen. This time, there will happily be some recognition of familiar faces among people. As more such encounters take place, the comfort level and the degree of understanding between people rises. Possibilities for new life opens up.

Family Ties

Oh how warm, comfortable, and intimate is life at St. John's Kitchen some days. Recently we talked to a middle-aged friend who met with her thirty year-old daughter and two grandchildren for the first time since she was forced to give up her daughter at birth. We sat and talked through shocked, confused, and mixed feelings. It appears that everything will turn out fine. The daughter is a patient, gentle, understanding, and beautiful young woman. Our friend has come to terms over the years with many aching realities in her life and has a shining spirit. They seemed proud of each other and willing to pursue a relationship without upsetting each other's lives.

We talked also to a senior woman who, along with a sister, had been given up for adoption at the age of two. She has reconnected with her sister once or twice over these many years but now begins to wonder if there were other family members. She



also wonders about the circumstances which forced her mother to give up her children. She has led a strong, independent, and responsible life and keeps busy and involved even now. But she is getting increasingly curious about her heritage. She begins to piece together a few of the fragments of her past and may decide to pursue it further.

We are privileged to be listeners to her reminiscences and musings. Her curiosity and lively interest in her past as well as her gentleness and willingness to embrace it are truly admirable.

A recent sad occasion became an opportunity to strengthen ties between some of the people at St. John's Kitchen. The very sudden death of a middle-aged man left his wife with many concerns about the funeral arrangements. They were a friendly couple who came to St. John's often and had befriended volunteers and staff. Gretchen, Don, and Eleanor offered to make sandwiches on the Saturday of the funeral and to deliver them to the widow's home for a reception following the funeral. Another person provided cheese and crackers. Numerous people attended the wake and the funeral. The widow has returned to St. John's Kitchen and expressed thanks for the support which she received at that very difficult time.

Olympic Gold

If courage and determination and succeeding against all odds were rewarded with gold medals, "Judy" would have one for each of the last eight years of her life. When we first met she was a Kitchener street kid whose future looked dismal. Today, eight years later, she is in her graduating year at University. And she did it alone. No family or team support. The obstacles which she overcame and the hurdles which she conquered make her a true champion in life. It was heart-warming and exhilarating to meet her again recently and to hear her story. We commiserated with her and laughed with her about the absurdity of the system that punishes with debt a person who is so obviously trying to become a productive citizen. We rejoiced with her in her many successes and we hoped with her for a fulfilling future upon graduation.



Conversations With a Friend

And finally, spring seems a little closer, in the middle of this rather bleak February weather, when I recall these two whimsical stories told to me by one of our most unique street friends.

“Every now and again I need to get away from it all. I gather enough money for a return bus trip that will take me a short distance north of the city. I take only bare essentials with me, disembark from the bus in the middle of nowhere, go off the road and enter the woods where I know I will come across a stream. I camp there with only the natural shelter of the trees, fish, cook out in the open, sleep under the stars, and wake up when my body has had enough rest. I have already learned the bus schedule so when I'm ready to return to the city, I walk back out to the road, and flag down the bus.”

This next story is a playful one. “I had arranged to meet a friend and when he didn't show up at the appointed time, I decided to sit and wait under a nearby tree. I spotted a huge dead bumble bee in the grass nearby, picked it up and held it in the palm of my hand to examine it more closely. At that moment I recalled that old cliché; “Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder”. It then occurred to me that, in that moment, I was, ironically, the bee-holder. I looked up and around me and saw at that instant, what surrounded me was truly a beautiful vision. Everything was truly beautiful. At another time, in a different frame of mind, that same setting might not have looked beautiful at all. But I had a moment of deep connection with nature because of an old cliché.”

Keeping Things in Perspective

Stories abound at St. John's Kitchen. Some occur instantaneously, others unravel over time. It would be easy to decide that a “soup kitchen” is a poor, dreary place where the same routine is repeated day in and day out. It would be easy to decide that the hardships faced by people each day would be very depressing. Not so. The connections that are made between people both within and outside of St. John's and the ties that are woven each day between people create a very rich and nourishing fabric of life. Small daily events don't eliminate the larger problems but they do outshine them.



Bill 142 – The Social Justice Assistance Reform Act

Issue 53, June 1998



As of June 1st, the Family Benefits Act, The Vocational Rehabilitation Services Act, and The General Welfare Act will have been replaced by The Ontario Works Act (OWA) and the Ontario Disability Support Program Act (ODSPA) in accordance with The Social Assistance Reform Act or Bill 142. I waded through Bill 142 (75 pages) on the internet one night recently and hastily concluded that I would not want to be subject to it, nor would I want to have to work by it, or be responsible for enforcing it.

It is a very depressing piece of legislation which will not only create desperation and hopelessness for those who are already struggling to stay alive, but which will also, I believe, impoverish all of us who live in this province. This Act, with its many sections and sub-sections, leaves no stone unturned, no corner uncut, and no penny uncounted in paring down the measly incomes of our most vulnerable fellow citizens.

How can we consider subjecting people between the ages of 60 and 64 to workfare? Who would want to deprive a pregnant woman of an extra \$37 per month when she



has extra expenses of maternity and baby clothing, calcium and vitamins, a balanced diet, transportation for doctor's appointments, etc. Why would we want to include the value of food, meals, or services such as babysitting donated by friends, as income to be deducted from the person's allowance? Also considered as income are any loans which might be taken to pay the last month's rent or just to get through to the end of the month. Since a person's income will be reduced by the amount of the loan, I wonder how they will manage to repay the loan? Didn't Mike Harris say that people would be able to rely on help from family and the community when he first cut assistance rates by 22% in October 1995? This is but a tiny sample of the cost cutting measures included in the acts of Bill 142.

Trying to access social assistance if you should be so unlucky as to need help is an even greater nightmare. The many requirements, testing, and delays seem designed to discourage vulnerable people from even applying. Additionally, "what the regulations do not talk about is the attitude that people will meet in Ontario Works Offices, but this may be more important than any of the individual rules. Places like Alberta brag about the fact that their welfare workers are trained to try to make it hard to apply for welfare. Expect Ontario workers to do the same." (Social Safety News, Issue 19, April 1998)

I am reminded here of "Helen", a middle-aged woman on Social Assistance, whom I met recently when she came to St. John's Kitchen for a work term during her "retraining program" in the Food and Hospitality Industry. She is a trusting person who simply wants to do the right thing. She would dearly love to have a paying job and to get "off welfare." Helen does very good, thorough, and neat work. She was willing to do whatever tasks were needed and got along well with everyone at St. John's Kitchen. But she requires ongoing direction and supervision and is incapable of working fast. For all these reasons, she was not able to get even a temporary placement position in any fast food outlet. Sadly, just one month before Helen was scheduled to graduate and to receive a certificate in Food and Hospitality Services, her worker decided that she was not suited for this work and terminated this schooling. Does anyone count the human costs of these decisions? I wonder what it might have meant for Helen's self-esteem if she had been allowed to earn her first certificate? Helen herself says, "I don't know why I still call her my social worker. She



doesn't seem very social to me." Meanwhile, Helen has been shifted into a sheltered workshop where she will attempt to learn computers. Her worker is constantly telling her that if she doesn't soon get a job she will be cut off assistance. This may possibly be an idle threat but it keeps Helen in a perpetual state of fear and uncertainty. One wonders, whose life is it anyway?

When I discussed these issues and examples with a friend recently, he commented: "That makes me feel so cheap. Is it really necessary for us to nickel and dime everyone to death?" My reaction was similar. There is no heart, no spirit, and absolutely no caring in all of these latest moves to reform social assistance. They are formulated in the name of debt and deficit reduction when in reality, a large part of the national and provincial debt was created by tax cuts to large corporations and the wealthy and by usurious interest rates imposed by large banks and other moneylenders.

A Different Reality

Recently I read in the *Toronto Star* (April 29, 1998) that the "world's rich are getting richer[...] in the next three years the wealth of the mega-rich will grow by 10 percent annually reaching \$23.1 trillion at the end of the year 2000." What an astonishing figure! And a mere 20% of the world's population controls these trillions of dollars in a finance system which David Korten, author of *When Corporations Rule the World* (Kumarian Press, 1995), describes as a "global gambling casino." \$37 per month in the hands of a pregnant woman is a figure that I can better understand. It also seems like a more positive use of money or a better bet if it improves the chances for the birth of a healthy child. Instead, a growing proportion of our public wealth is flowing to the moneyed people rather than paying for the society we need. Bill 142 supports and strengthens the corporate agenda. It chips away at all the social gains made in the past 50 years.

Social Safety

The Social Safety News is a joint publication of Ontario Legal Clinics' Steering Committee on Social Assistance and the Social Planning Council of Toronto. It claims that "one of the most important provisions in the Ontario Works Act is the creation of a welfare police force, called 'Eligibility Review Officers' or ERO. EROs



are given extensive and quite frightening powers.” They are able to do random home visits at any time, without any suspicion of wrongdoing. They can get search warrants to search homes. They may enter any place other than a home and demand the production of records, computer disks, and data if they believe that they might contain evidence related to eligibility of recipients. The EROs can also demand that anyone in the place cooperate with the investigation and answer the ERO's questions. If a person (counselors, therapists, service agencies, shelters, food banks, etc.) refuses to answer or to assist with a demand to produce information, they may be charged with the offense of obstructing an Eligibility Review Officer and fined or imprisoned.

As my friend in our discussions said a while back, "This makes me feel so mean." It threatens to pit service workers against the very people that they are trying to help and even build friendships with. How can we establish mutual trust and support for each other in this kind of environment? How, indeed, can we even hope to build community? The Toronto Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services has said publicly, “There is a fundamental contradiction between policing and client support functions.”

Travesty of Justice/Not Reform

Reform has always meant to me that something was going to be improved or get better. Premier Harris himself said, “We are going to give people a hand-up.” This bill is not a reform or a hand-up; it is a push farther down into poverty. If we put it together with cuts to health and education, abandonment of provincial subsidies to social housing, public transportation, and other costs, it adds up to very substantial punishment of vulnerable people in our midst. Linda McQuaig, author of five books challenging the prevailing economy, visited Kitchener recently. She decries the fashionable view these days that economic costs are all that matter, that human costs are not important. “That simply is an unacceptable formulation. It should be illegal. We're talking about people's lives here, their sense of self-worth. They are depriving people of a sense of involvement in their world and in their communities.” McQuaig insists that there are alternatives, that governments can adopt more people-friendly policies to foster greater employment, a strong safety net, and the eradication of child poverty.



Trying to Understand

International finance and economic systems are very complex. But as I begin to understand them even a little I see a total lack of balance and a great lopsidedness. The nickels and dimes that are extracted from the general populace add up to whopping subsidies and tax credits to the very rich financial institutions and corporations who seem insatiable in their quest for profits and unfettered access to world markets. These are very good economic times for some. There is a lot of money flowing around (more than \$23 trillion). Why can't wealth be equitably and justly distributed? How can we say, through our Bills and through our political actions, that we can't afford a basic standard of living for all?

Let us heed the words of Canada's Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Falardeau-Ramsay, when she says, "Poverty is a serious breach of equality rights which I believe has no place in a country as prosperous as ours." (KW Record, May 28, 1998, p. A11)

It is a very depressing piece of legislation which will not only create desperation and hopelessness (for those who are already struggling to stay alive), but which will also, I believe, impoverish all of us who live in this province.



St. John's Kitchen Garden Community

Issue 54, September 1998

Their enthusiasm for the land, the seeds, the planting, weeding and harvesting, as well as for the early morning sunrises and late evening sunsets out in the open space is infectious.



You should see our garden! In less than three months an abandoned field of weeds in the countryside has been transformed into an acre of lush growing vegetables. Already we, at St. John's Kitchen, are eating our own chemical-free potatoes, onions, cabbage, squash, green beans, beets, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and herbs. We have also blanched and frozen several pails of green beans for the coming Winter. And there is lots more to come! There are plans to pickle beets, dry and store Romano beans, and freeze all the vegetables that we can. Fresh, living produce will be added to the daily meal at St. John's Kitchen and some will be shared with those who want to take it home.

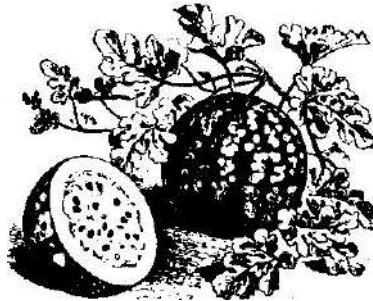
How delightful it is to hear Joan, Rob, Cheryl, and Gretchen talk about cultivating and preparing tile land donated to us by the Schlaschlinger family in Petersburg. Their enthusiasm for the land, the seeds, the planting, the weeding, and the harvesting, as well as for the early morning sunrises and late evening sunsets out in the open space is infectious. Already two people have said: "This is the best Summer I've ever had!"



Many people have had a hand in the garden. The openness of the leadership team and the simplicity of the work required to maintain a garden make it possible for any interested person to participate. Rides between the city and the country are easily arranged between those without vehicles and those with. It is awesome to experience the camaraderie, the conversations, the fun, the friendship, and the support that develop between a variety of people when they participate in a common task with a common goal. They are in nature doing what comes nature-ly! And the work of the gardeners is completed by volunteers at the kitchen who clean and prepare the harvest. The garden has easily evolved into the St. John's Kitchen Garden Community.

Meaning of a Local Garden

We do not expect that this garden will fill all the food needs of St. John's Kitchen. As a matter of fact, there has always been more than enough food available from other sources to prepare the meal which feeds over 200 of us each day. Initially, our interest in having a garden stemmed from a desire to add healthy, living foods to our menu. Many of us are growing more aware and more anxious about the pesticides and chemicals that are added to modern foods. We must eat to live but we question whether eating a balanced diet comprised of supermarket foods contributes to our health or whether it might, on the contrary, be damaging to our health?



Who Controls the Food

It is hard to ignore (nor do we want to) the growing number of books and articles which tell a grim story of the whole food production and distribution system which



most of us rely on. Kathleen O'Hara lives in Ottawa and writes for the Issues Network. Her observations and research led her to the conclusion that “grocery stores abound, but many of us suffer from malnutrition.” She discovered that much of our food is grown in “dead” soil which has few nutrients and is further compromised by chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Many foods have antibiotics and hormones added to them and others are genetically altered. (K-W Record, May 29, 1998).

A few very large transnational corporations control all aspects and sources of food production throughout the world. Brewster and Cathleen Kneen, B.C. farmers and activists well-known to The Working Centre, publish a monthly newsletter called **The Ram's Horn**. They keep a very close eye on agriculture and agribusiness. In a recent address to Canadian dietitians, Brewster said:

It appears that the major transnational corporations involved in drugs, agrottoxins, biotechnology, and now seeds, are bent on taking direct control over what we eat. They are taking whole foods down the same road as they have taken the seeds themselves – to monoculture, uniformity and dependency – for the sake, not of nutrition, but of industrial production and corporate control and profit.

The Ram's Horn, No. 160, June 1998

I remember being taught in my high school classes in a small agricultural community that the healthiest and most productive farms were those that rotated diverse crops, saved seeds for future plantings, did companion planting, and allowed each section of the land to rest periodically. Sounds very different from the monoculture, uniformity, and dependency on pesticides practised by agribusiness!

I remember, also, my grandparents' large vegetable garden which flourished for over forty years behind the Hotel and General Store which were their life's work. The harvest from that one garden, along with a few cows, pigs, and chickens sustained a large family and a few employees, and graced the dining tables of the hotel guests. Of course, there was always plenty of work for everyone 'never mind your age'.



Many Uses For Food

Food is used in so many ways, some very good, and some very, very bad. John Robbins, author of *May All Be Fed: Diet For a New World*, says:

“There are few places where the spiritual, political, personal, and ecological dimensions of our lives meet as fully as they do when we sit down to eat our breakfasts, lunches and dinners.”

A profit-making industrial system of food production has emerged since World War II which serves up food not only lacking in nutritional value, but even more dangerous, at ever rising prices. For example, Canada, once self-sufficient in tomatoes now depends almost entirely on a very few American-based transnational corporations for all tomato products. We can grow tomatoes but their quality, processing, and distribution is totally controlled by others. I wonder, is a tomato still a tomato, when it has been grown in chemically fertilized land or in a lab, protected by pesticides, picked when it's still green, ripened by spraying with ethylene gas, and processed with lye? The same question can be asked about all other fruits and vegetables. No food seems very safe or nutritious.



Food has become an important commodity in the foreign policy goals of the United States. In an effort to make other countries more and more dependent on American markets, individual farmers and small land owners all over the world have been squeezed off their land. Control of almost all means of production and processing concentrated in the hands of a few powerful corporations reduces choices for all other people. Even our food banks and soup kitchens rely on their products which are often donated when they do not satisfy quality control regulations, have been damaged, exceed expiry dates, or have lost their labels. By donating these goods



companies are able to avoid dumping fees at the landfill site thus making business even more profitable.

Another Food System

This is only a cursory view of the modern food system. The implications for the land, the ecosystem, and for human life are so far-reaching as to be very frightening.

The St. John's Kitchen Garden is only one of twenty such gardens started up in our region alone in the last few years. Thankfully, it is a growing trend. These gardens allow us to distance ourselves, at least a little, from the predominant, very destructive system. But there is good reason to believe that all countries could become food self-sufficient if given control over their own land. David Korten (*When Corporations Rule the World*, Kumarien Press, Inc., 1995, p.13), states:

It is within our means to reclaim the power that we have yielded to the institutions of money and re-create societies that nurture cultural and biological diversity – thus opening vast new opportunities for social, intellectual, and spiritual advancement beyond our present imagination. Millions of people the world over are already acting to reclaim this power and to rebuild their communities and heal the earth.



Caring Communities

Issue 55, December 1998

Christmas Past

I love this time of the year for all the treasured memories of Christmases past that come flooding in. I get to enjoy once again the Christmases of my childhood spent in the little Northern Ontario village of Gowganda.

Gowganda was a small mining, lumbering, fishing, hunting, and tourist town with a population of about 250 permanent residents. The population count fluctuated according to the level of the nearby mine and lumber activities and it swelled considerably during the summer tourist season. It grew up around one end of a beautiful and clear northern lake which was the source of recreation, sport, and fish dinners for everyone.

My grandparents, Hector and Delima Lafrance, owned and operated the local hotel, general store, and post office. They sold everything in the store that a person would need for daily living, including blocks of ice taken from the lake in winter and gasoline and oil for the few cars that were around at the time. The hotel not only provided lodging and meals for long-term and short-term guests but was also the family home. Almost every person in town entered that building each and every day, either to buy some necessity, pick up mail or a newspaper, or to simply visit everyone else. This was especially true in winter-time when regulars arrived early to talk as they sat in chairs gathered around the pot-bellied stove in the post office area.

This is where I spent many of my childhood Christmases. We would wake in the morning, have a family breakfast in our own home, open our gifts and head over to the hotel to spend the day, evening, and even the night if you were old enough to look after yourself. On Christmas day, business closed down but the doors were open to everyone. No money ever changed hands on that day, very few gifts were exchanged, but many people were wined and dined. One uncle played the piano throughout the day while others sang carols and other familiar tunes. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and employees and their families made up most



of the big gathering but all hotel guests and townspeople without families joined the crowd. It was the place to be. I don't know of anyone in town who ever spent Christmas day alone.

Christmas Present

It is somewhat comforting to know that at least one dinner is being offered to people who are alone or poor each day throughout the entire holiday season in our community. Numerous individuals or groups will work hard to provide a delicious meal and to create the most hospitable and welcoming atmosphere possible. These are significant and vital expressions of the Christmas spirit of giving. No person should go hungry on Christmas day (or any other day).

On the other hand, this is of very little comfort when one considers the thousands of dollars that will be spent on gifts, parties, and bonuses that many people don't need. Compare these gifts to the toques, hats, scarves, and gloves that will be distributed at soup kitchens, thrift shops, and shelters to poor people. These are very important for winter protection of the growing numbers who cannot afford to buy even such basic necessities. But wouldn't it be nicer, more appropriate, a little more just, if for example, people receiving Social Assistance had their paltry December incomes doubled or tripled? What a Christmas gift that would be! Being able to pay off a debt, seek some shelter, or even choose gifts that their children really wanted or needed without having to register to receive gifts given anonymously. This is affordable in a country as wealthy as ours.

Last year, throughout Ontario, we had a chance to hear first-hand accounts of what it's like to try to live and, in most cases, raise children on subsistence incomes. As one mother of three said: "I don't think that people realize what living like this does to a person. It's not just the matter of going without; it's what it does to a person emotionally, physically, and spiritually. All sense of hope is taken away. You become oppressed and can no longer function. You suffer physically because you are not eating, emotionally because your social contact is lost, spiritually because all hope is gone." Hers and other stories of Ontarians are published in a book *Our Neighbours' Voices: Will We Listen?* by The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition. The Coalition, after meeting many people throughout the provinces, emphasizes two



themes: “The misunderstanding among good people of how the less fortunate end up in poverty and in need, and what their lives are like; and the need to repair and reknit the social safety net and rebuild our sense of community.”

It often seems difficult to build a sense of community in larger cities such as Kitchener and Waterloo. Mostly we live in the suburbs and are not intimately aware of what is happening to individuals in poorer parts of town or sometimes even in our own neighbourhoods. Our lives are fast-paced. We travel mostly in cars. We don't ever get to know the streets well, with their changing nuances and their people, unless we walk along them regularly.

It may well be hard to build community in cities but it is not impossible. There are many examples where this is happening. David Schwartz, writing in *Who Cares? Rediscovering Community*, describes his observations of life in his own neighbourhood in the state capital. It wasn't until he took off his professional hat and started hanging out in the neighbourhood coffee shop and other spots that he saw the neighbourly kind of caring that went on. People in that neighbourhood who needed help, for whatever reason, did not always have to turn to professional social service agencies and programs. Their neighbours knew them and understood their needs and each neighbor did what he or she was best at. Schwartz calls these acts “remnants of hospitality.”

Closer to home, another gesture of hospitality will be offered at St. John's Church on Christmas day. Gretchen Jones and a number of friends who are free on Christmas day will gather in this central place for a buffet supper and celebration between 3:30 and 6:00 P.M. Casseroles, salads and desserts are being solicited from anyone who wishes to contribute in this way. It is expected that about two hundred people will be present to share the good time. No one should go hungry.



Christmas Future

Don McLellan, writing in the September 1998 issue of *Catholic New Times*, describes a future church. I borrow his ideas and paraphrase his words to describe what caring communities might be in the millenium:

- * The social services of the next millenium will be simpler and humbler. They will be shaped by men and women who have a profound sense of community.
- * It will be a community of inclusion where those already judged enough in their lives will find hospitality and unconditional love.
- * Communities will be messengers of hope to people whose lives are fragmented but who need to believe that there is reason to hope.
- * We will grow as caring communities because caring is what makes us most human.

And humanity is what that first Christmas was all about, it seems to me. May each of us experience a caring community this Christmas!



The Meaning of Hospitality

Issue 56, March 1999



The twelfth Annual Mayor's Dinner, April 10th, 1999, honours Lucille Mitchell, founder and past president of Hospice of Waterloo Region. Hospice offers individualized care to dying persons and stresses living fully until the very end of life, with dignity and in comfort. It recognizes that patients with terminal illnesses can have some control over their lives until the end and that the grief suffered by their surviving relatives and friends can be eased by trained caregivers. Hospice of Waterloo Region joins the growing number of hospices that are developing around the world. There are currently more than six hundred and fifty programs and services across Canada alone and they can be accessed by patients who are in hospital, seniors' homes, or in their own homes. Trained hospice volunteers provide emotional and spiritual support to families and patients as well as practical help to caregivers who need a break from responsibilities. They support and augment the palliative or terminal care given by a multi-disciplinary team of professional caregivers. As Lucille Mitchell says, "We won't be doing nursing care. We will be those extra hands that other services in the community, like homecare or VON, don't fill. We will fill the void when they can't be there. And our services will be free, staffed by volunteers. We envision being able to reach out to a lot of people who would otherwise be left in the lurch."



Filling a Community Need

There are many reasons to believe that a great and growing need for hospice care exists in our community and elsewhere. The population is aging at the same time as the health care system is becoming even more community-based. These factors place more responsibility on family members for the care of those who are dying and increase the need for support services.

A national survey conducted by the Angus Reid Group in 1997 concluded that hospice care is the kind of care close to 90% of Canadians say they want at the end of life. However, only 6% of Canadians feel that they could adequately care for a loved one facing a life-threatening illness without outside assistance.

The Failure of a Community

I am reminded of a patient many years ago who died very alone in a room in a hospital where I had my first job as a nurse. This is a prime example of where all caregivers failed miserably because of a lack of training and experience, and I have deeply regretted ever since my own inadequacy at the time. The patient was a middle-aged, single woman who was stricken with terrible cancer of the face. It ate away at her eyes, nose, one ear, and her mouth, left her with grossly distorted features and a foul discharge that had to be cleaned and dressed regularly. This, it seems to me, is the only care that she received. Her private room door was closed at night and when it was reopened in the morning, the stench made all members of the staff loath to enter the room. Unfortunately, no one did unless it was necessary to do dressings, make the bed, or serve meals. She had no visitors and seemed to have no family. She was very patient, never complained, never asked for anything, and always seemed grateful for the smallest amount of care that was given to her. I remember well her calmness, her enduring patience, and the mysterious sense of wisdom and peace that she exuded. She never made me feel inadequate. I believe now that she had accepted death and that she finally died with great dignity and grace.

I don't know what physical or emotional agonies she may have suffered, for I regret that I never got to know her. But she remains a gift in my life. She lives on in my memory as a truly glorious human being. Hospice care might have made so much difference to this woman in the final stage of her life. Nobody even thought of it!



The Success of a Community

Margaret Frazer, on the other hand, also a single woman with no family close by, was the beneficiary of one of the best possible and best-known examples of hospice care available. Sixty acquaintances and friends took turns being with her around the clock during the final three months of her life. The inspiring story of Margaret and her team became a book, *Twelve Weeks in Spring*, written by well-known author and team member, June Callwood. Callwood describes this experiment in palliative care as “the human tribe functioning at its best.” Margaret's life ended “in a defiant blossoming of vitality and love” while her friends “discovered their own unexpected strength and humanity.” As Lucille Mitchell says, “There isn't a volunteer who wouldn't say that we get so much more than we give – I think we are both richer for the experience.”

Local Response

Hospice of Waterloo Region is a community-based and volunteer driven response to the needs of local people. As such, it has its own unique character because it is locally designed, complements existing local programs, and sets its own goals. During the period from March 1997 to April 1998 local hospice volunteers provided approximately 11,978 hours of their time to individuals and families in need. In the background, supporting this work, are the dreamers, fundraisers, coordinators, and directors whose work assures the vitality and the stability of the program.

In a similar way, The Working Centre got its humble start more than seventeen years ago in this community with a general goal of extending hospitality and of responding in a personal way to employment-related needs of local people. St. John's Kitchen, which opened in 1985, is a visible expression of that enduring goal. It offers a safe hospitable drop-in place and daily nutritious meals to all those in need. The Working Centre itself has grown and evolved to the extent that it offers, without cost, all job search resources, strong personalized support, and wonderful tools for simple daily living and personal fulfillment to as many as 150 people per day.

We are very grateful for the support given to us at the Annual Mayors' Dinner and we are pleased to have this occasion to honour local citizens who have made a significant contribution to their community. And so we say, “Good for you, Lucille Mitchell! You have given a lasting gift to your community. We honour you.”



Homelessness

Issue 57, June 1999

I dropped in to see Mary and her family in their new "home" the other day. A very excited and happy little group welcomed me in. Mary is a widow who works very hard to provide a stable and happy home for her three children and to raise them to be responsible and caring citizens. And she has been eminently successful! Each of her children - ages 20, 18, and 10 - impresses one with their strong goals and commitment to the future, their diligent work and resultant success at school, their generous contribution to family life, their joy, their enthusiasm, and especially their love and support for each other.

The greatest challenge confronting this beautiful family since they've been on their own and on Social Assistance has been housing. Decent, affordable housing eludes everyone whose income is limited. The lack of it, the constant search for it drains all one's energy, occupies all of one's waking hours and sucks up an inordinate amount of one's income, leaving very little for other needs such as food and clothing.

For Mary and her family, several years of struggle to find a decent place to live came to a happy conclusion recently when a generous and fair owner/landlady agreed to rent them a newly-renovated, three bedroom, semi-detached home at an affordable price. It seems to me that this will be a mutually beneficial arrangement. I imagine that many gifts will flow between the families and, of course, the landlady will have the peace of mind that comes with having solid, responsible tenants. Best of all, Mary has recently secured a full-time job.

John is a mildly disabled single man whose income is approximately \$650 per month. That is not a great deal of money, even for a single person, but the mere fact that he lives in subsidized housing makes all the difference in the world to his lifestyle. His needs and wants are quite simple, so with his rent for a small one bedroom apartment set at only \$180 monthly, he is able to live a satisfying life. Unable to get a job, he stays involved in the community by volunteering.

Doug is a middle-aged single man who makes his home at Eby Village. This is a high-rise, fifty-six unit apartment building erected in downtown Kitchener in 1990



for single adults. Rents are compatible with incomes and a tenants committee meets regularly to plan activities and to resolve problems. Life at Eby Village is affordable and offers support to people who might otherwise be lonely.

Rosemary is a middle-aged woman who owns her own modest home. It is her only material asset. Rosemary walks miles each day delivering newspapers and flyers. Sometimes she is fortunate enough to get temporary, low paying jobs to augment her income. Occasionally, when these sources do not generate enough money to support her simple lifestyle and to maintain her house, she has to apply for welfare relief. This is how this very cheerful, hardworking, and generous woman gets by. Needless to say, if our government ever follows through on its frequent threats to penalize homeowners who require welfare relief, Rosemary's life would change significantly. She is an independent, relatively self-supporting person now. It would seem a shame to disturb her current way of life or to deny her the little bit of support that she needs.

Mary and her children, as well as John, Doug, and Rosemary are eight people in our community who are able to live comfortably and humanely and get on with jobs and/or community involvement simply because they now have secure housing. There are still many people who are not as lucky. Homelessness is actually growing in this wealthy country.

Happily, this topic seems to have gained some much-needed attention from the media lately. Almost every day an article related to homelessness appears in our newspapers or is heard on radio and television news. It might be hoped that as awareness grows, involvement will grow too because it is a situation that cries out for the skills, imagination, and support of the whole community before it becomes too overwhelming.

Healthy Communities

Every one of us needs a basic home in which to live, a place in which we can feel comfortable, free, and safe. For some it will be a house, for others an apartment, and for yet others a room with shared spaces. Our community will be at its healthiest, its safest, its best when every resident is adequately housed.



There are probably many ways of achieving this goal. Most of us are well able to provide for ourselves. But there are people for whom this is simply not possible.

It is reasonable to expect that all levels of government should be involved in some way in assuring that all citizens are housed. Alas, we have seen in recent times that the level of government support is eroding and even being shifted downward from one tier to another. When responsibility for housing finally falls to the local level, however, it becomes more personal. It is easier for all of us to realize that more local people and groups are needed to find local solutions. And it is at the local level that creative responses have the best chance of taking root.

43 Queen Street South

The Working Centre was able, a few years ago, to renovate the empty apartments on the top floor of 58 Queen Street South. These became safe affordable housing for six people.

At 43 Queen Street South, across the street, the empty, unused third floor will also be recreated in order to accommodate six more people. Two three bedroom apartments will provide emergency and supportive housing for three singles in each apartment. The apartments will be designed with extra common areas to enhance the living space.

The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen are volunteer-driven operations. It is only because of the tremendous energy and input of volunteers that the works of these operations can be done. Many of those who contribute so much come to The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen initially seeking job search support or a meal. We are sure many such people who also find themselves in precarious housing situations will be able to find long-term housing in our small housing projects.

Over the next three months we will be preparing plans to organize a building bee to construct the apartments with as much volunteer labour as possible. We are looking forward to initiating and making this important downtown housing project become a reality in a few short months.



Other New Initiatives

It is possible to imagine that many similar small initiatives, undertaken by other groups, could also help to reduce the level of homelessness little by little. I caught the tail end of a CBC newscast recently that told about Toronto realtors who were planning to raise enough money to build six houses in their city. I also saw a picture and story in the Toronto Star that told of City Councilors working with the Canadian Auto Workers to convert a warehouse into shelter for street kids.

I imagine that many such groups, formal or informal, could come together in Waterloo Region to create safe, affordable housing. What if every church were to build or renovate a house and offer it at a low sale or rental price? What a project that might be, bringing members of all ages together in a common task!

Non-Profit Housing

There are a number of groups in Waterloo Region who have created and provided a variety of housing over many years. These non-profit housing groups need to be encouraged and supported to carry on. Shelters, a form of temporary housing for people whose lives are at risk, need secure funding to continue their work. The need for these services is growing and they are barely able to carry on.

Conclusion

I will never forget the story told by Mary Jo Leddy in the *Catholic New Times* a few years ago. When a refugee to Canada asked her what the building in the back yard was, she tried to tell him that it was a garage but this was a word that he didn't understand. Finally, she had to tell him that this was "a house for a car."

For the sake of all of us and for many obvious reasons, we cannot allow homelessness to grow any further. We are all diminished when any of our citizens are stripped of their dignity and left homeless. Tackling homelessness is a task that requires the will, the skill, the resources, and the enthusiasm of all of us.



A Feast for the Soul

Issue 58, September 1999



Thank you to the thousands of people whom I have encountered over the last eleven years at St. John's Kitchen. My work here has enabled me to meet, to socialize with, and to work with more people than I ever could have imagined. A wonderful variety of gifts, talents, personalities, experiences, and treasures has enriched my life beyond measure. I will carry some part of each one in my heart and in my very bones for the rest of my days, for all have become part of me.

Eleven years ago, I entered St. John's Kitchen, in fear and trepidation, for my first day of work. There were many questions on my mind and a great deal of nervousness. Here I was in a room crowded with strangers and I had to get to know them all. I was equipped with only a great deal of enthusiasm and many neat, tidy, and ultimately silly ideas of how things should be organized. But the people became my teachers. I learned over and over again that people, all of us, wherever we are and whatever our socio-economic status, more than anything else, want to be treated



with respect and dignity; and that we flourish and blossom when we give and receive love and understanding. I also learned that there is an enormous amount of fun to be had when several people work together to prepare, cook, and serve a meal to a large group of fellow human beings. It is not true, as they say, that “too many cooks spoil the broth!” Conversely, they enrich it! And what about the cleaning up afterwards? It is true, as they say, that “many hands make light work.” It is so gratifying at the end of the day to see numerous people pitch in to do the many and assorted tasks needed to leave everything in readiness for yet another day. I shall miss all of this activity, and especially each of these remarkable and generous-hearted individuals as I retire from this work and start yet another life. As I reflect on these past eleven years, I find meaning and expression in Jean Vanier's newest book, ***Becoming Human*** (House of Anansi Press, 1998).

Becoming Human

In 1964 Jean Vanier founded L'Arche, an international network of communities for people with intellectual disabilities. In his book, he shares from his significant experience, a "profoundly human vision for creating a common good that radically changes our communities, our relationships, and ourselves." It was a privilege for me when I recently met and listened to this humble man whose chosen work has not only had such a significant impact all over the world, but whose own heart is so visibly filled with peace and joyfulness as a result. Jean Vanier tells us that:

Society is the place where we learn to develop our potential and become competent; where we work and receive a salary that allows us to live financially independently. It is the place where each can accomplish his or her mission, to work for justice, to struggle for peace and to serve others.

Belonging, on the other hand, is the place where we can find a certain emotional security. It is a place where we learn a lot about ourselves, our fears, our blockages, and our violence, as well as our capacity to give life; it is the place where we grow to appreciate others, to live with them, to share and work together, discovering each one's gifts and weaknesses. We receive and give the knocks of life. It is like the polishing of diamonds as they rub together. (p. 57-58)



It seems quite natural and logical, in a discussion of St. John's Kitchen, to associate with these two concepts of society and belonging. Most people who come to St. John's Kitchen do so because they are unable to meet the requirements and expectations of society, as we know it. Because they are either unable to work or unable to find steady, paid employment, they are not considered to be successful in a society that measures success in terms of salaries, possessions, social status, and power. And so they are marginalized. They live at the fringes of society. As Vanier says:

Those who are weak have great difficulty finding their place in society. The image of the ideal human as powerful and capable disenfranchises the old, the sick, the less-abled. For me, society must, by definition, be inclusive of the needs and gifts of all its members[...] I also believe that those we most often exclude from the normal life of society have profound lessons to teach us. When we do include them, they add richly to our lives and add immensely to our world. (p. 45)

Polishing Diamonds

Often I have asked people who come to St. John's Kitchen, "What brought you here?" Their replies vary from "I wanted to learn about another way of life" to "I am depressed and I thought it might help to be doing something" to "Nobody else wanted me." Within a short time of being involved and of "giving and receiving the knocks of life," they felt a sense of belonging, discovered heretofore unknown skills, overcame depression, and in some cases were able to find a job.

It is difficult to overcome a life of early and violent abuse, homelessness, alcoholism, and imprisonment. But "Jim" has succeeded and is now a very obviously devoted family man living in a stable home.

It would be hard to measure the contribution to this point of "John" who has become the custodial parent of his school-aged son who was struggling with an inability to learn and serious behaviour problems developed during a short lifetime of verbal abuse in a dysfunctional home. John, whose own early life was chaotic, completed his schooling, studied parenting skills and childhood development, entered a job and set up a home for his son. Three years later, John's son, who is very bright, is thriving in



school, is able to relate in a healthy way to others, and is a cheerful, friendly growing boy.

“Hector” came into the kitchen recently to say hello and thanks. He frequented St. John's Kitchen during a period of unemployment about six years ago. Since that time he has been steadily employed in another city and dropped in while on vacation. He has never forgotten us and wanted to make sure that we would continue to remember him. These folks and many, many others are the diamonds who have put sparkle into my world – a world, like Jean Vanier's, of “celebration, presence, and laughter”.

Thanksgiving

St. John's Kitchen is, in many ways, a very open community. Anyone with an interest or curiosity is welcome to come in any day. Many visitors have come and stayed for lunch. They are warmed and surprised by the openness, hospitality, and good cheer of the people. We appreciate their interest.

We have many generous supporters throughout the KW community and beyond. Over the fifteen years of operation, our government grant shrank steadily until 1995, when it disappeared entirely. With the exception of \$5,500 from the Region of Waterloo, St. John's Kitchen depends entirely on the good will and generosity of its many supporters. They provide not only financial support but also strong moral support. One retired teacher and former volunteer donates all of his Ontario Government tax cut to St. John's Kitchen “where it rightfully belongs,” according to him. Our contact with supporters has become personal through letters, telephone conversations, and speaking engagements where we meet face to face. Your words of encouragement lift the heart and enrich the soul. Thank you.

Volunteers, like our supporters, are the life-blood of St. John's Kitchen. Without their daily help of preparing, cooking, and serving foods, cleaning and maintaining the premises, planting, weeding, and harvesting our garden, picking up and delivering our goods, and looking after our laundry, St. John's could not exist. Some have been here since the beginning days. Others come and go. They come in all ages and from all walks of life and they too participate in the giving and receiving and even in the knocks of life. They truly are diamonds!



Food is an important part of life at St. John's Kitchen. It is around food that we gather to nourish and sustain our bodies. And it is around food that we gather to recognize our common humanity and to establish a sense of belonging. So we thank the Food Bank, the local farmers and gardeners, the churches and the individuals who fill our table so abundantly.

Thanks also to the people of St. John's Church who agreed, fifteen years ago, to share their building with us. We have, indeed, “shared and worked together, discovering each one's gifts and weaknesses, receiving and giving the knocks of life – like the polishing of diamonds as they rub together.” Your care and generosity, especially at Christmas time, brightens the season for many. Your mixing and mingling and visiting the upper hall when involved in weekday tasks at the church bring a sense of pleasure and well-being and an increased sense of belonging. I will miss my friends at St. John's.

Sincere thanks, too, to all of my co-workers, past and present, at St. John's Kitchen and at The Working Centre and to the Board of Directors who have enriched my sense of belonging and supported my participation in society. May your desire and efforts to contribute to the common good and to create a place of belonging for everyone continue to bear fruit and to bring you joy.

And to my many friends at St. John's Kitchen who contribute so much to the meaning of life, a deep and heartfelt thank you for enabling me in my quest to become fully human. You have brought joy and gratitude to my heart and you have given me beautiful memories!

Welcome

I welcome Jennifer Mains, as she becomes the coordinator of St. John's Kitchen. Jennifer has been a long-term friend and supporter of The Working Centre and St. John's Kitchen. Jennifer, may you quickly experience a wonderful sense of belonging.



Queen Street Comes Alive

Issue 89, May 2007



Reflections on 25 years of Working Centre activity on Queen Street

Have you been down on Queen Street South in Kitchener lately? There is a virtual many-faceted gem in the heart of downtown. Three buildings near the corner of Queen and Charles Streets and another at Victoria and Weber Streets house the projects of The Working Centre that serve hundreds of people in Waterloo Region and beyond in a variety of creative ways.

When I first joined The Working Centre in 1988, its two projects were St. John's Kitchen, located in the Anglican Church gym at Duke and Water Streets, and Employment Counselling Services in the basement and two floors of a rented



building at 58 Queen Street South. There were five people employed at the Kitchen and six at The Working Centre. This was a fledgling operation dedicated to the well-being of marginalized and unemployed people that depended heavily on volunteer helpers and financial support from the larger community.

It is so much fun now, a mere twenty years later, to survey the present day grown-up Working Centre, its expanded programs and buildings and the new St. John's Kitchen, a permanent home customized to serve the needs and pleasures of its patrons and workers.

It is well worth a visit to the downtown to see the transformation of four of Kitchener's historic old buildings at 43, 58, and 66 Queen Street South and at 97 Victoria Street North. They are treasures in the downtown and a monument to the imagination, skills, and labour of countless paid and unpaid workers, as well as to the support given by the larger community.

I am a self-appointed, enthusiastic tour guide of these very exciting new places. I am also keenly inspired by the vital, creative projects which give life to the buildings and, especially, by the many people whose vision, skills, dedication, and hope make it all such a lovely place, a lively place, a people place, a human place.

I usually start a tour at Queen's Greens further down Queen Street. This 10 year-old garden, a former parking lot, is a joint project of The Working Centre and the City of Kitchener, located across from the Joseph Schneider Haus and a trail leading into Victoria Park. The one-quarter acre garden is the work of volunteers who prepared the ground for planting and divided it into twenty 12' x 4' plots available for \$10 yearly to anyone wishing to grow organic vegetables or flowers for their own use. A garden shed occupies one corner and water is available from an attractive storage tank with the garden's logo painted on it. Located near the centre of the garden is an open wood-burning brick oven for the baking of bread and pizza sponsored by the well-known Ace Bakery. All of this is framed by a low white picket fence, enhanced by colourful perennial flowers, making it an interesting and attractive sight for travellers along Queen Street.

Our tour now moves closer to King Street, to the Queen Street Commons. The three storey building at 43 Queen Street South provides transitional, shared



affordable housing for six people, as well as room for Recycle Cycles, Barter Works, a group meeting space, a library of books, shelves adorned with local hand-crafted sale articles, a gallery wall for local art, and a bright friendly café. The café, open daily, is where soups, desserts, and delicious vegetarian entrees made of locally grown organic food are offered by staff and volunteers. Many groups meet here to share conversation, music, learn English, or plan projects. I hosted my bridge club here one recent afternoon. The beautiful refinished wooden floor, the eclectic colours, the reclaimed artifacts, the comfortable furniture, the cosy round café tables, the delectable food, and the friendly people will entice you back again and again.

Refreshed and suitably fortified, we can now walk across the street to 58 Queen Street South. This is the original rented Working Centre building that opened its storefront operation in 1982 to serve and to offer practical help to unemployed people. The recession in Ontario at that time and the consequent spike in unemployment numbers brought many people through the front doors.

There they would meet Joe and Stephanie Mancini, who started The Working Centre as recent graduates of St. Jerome's College at the University of Waterloo and the first recipients of the Father Norm Choate Award for outstanding community service.

Joe and Stephanie envisioned a grassroots community place and service that would honour and respect the inherent dignity of each person while at the same time offering them practical tools in their search for work and meaningful living. They encouraged people to recognize and value their own skills, to approach their tasks in a step by step way and to rejoice in progress achieved little by little. They were supported by like-minded people locally and influenced by earlier writers and activists who worked at the grassroots level. Chief among these were Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, founders of the Catholic Worker Houses. The Canadian Catholic bishops' statement *Unemployment: The Human Costs* issued in 1980 offered a model for their work. This document emphasized the dignity and worth of the worker. These ideals, while not so tangible as wood, bricks, and mortar, are nonetheless possibly the most important and distinguishing features, attributes, and gifts of The Working Centre to the larger community. That The Working Centre is truly a grassroots movement is evidenced by the original, ongoing, and lively



exchange of ideas among many people committed to a fair, just, and inclusive society, and by growing support throughout the Region.

Returning though to bricks and mortar at 58 Queen Street South, we encounter open spaces, accessible desks and chairs, computers, telephones, copy machines, and all the tools needed for a job or housing search. The teaching, support, and information needed to maximize their effectiveness are available from many helpers. Joe's doorless office is in this building on the third floor where this newspaper, Good Work News, is published and mailed out to 10,000 readers and donors. This is also the venue for sociology courses taught for credit by board member Ken Westhues of the University of Waterloo. The Waterloo School for Community Development exists here as well. It currently offers an eight-month diploma course in Local Democracy guided jointly by Ken and Joe Mancini that includes local and national speakers. Fifteen students received their diplomas last year and another fifteen are enrolled this year.

The Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support has its office in the basement alongside a sewing and craft project which has thrived since 1992 thanks to the skill and dedication of many volunteers. The very top floor includes two large, bright, affordable apartments, the first assisted housing offered by The Working Centre in 1995. This building was the very first one bought by The Working Centre and restored by paid and unpaid workers. It was an exciting time that established the permanence of The Working Centre in downtown Kitchener.

A sister building at 66 Queen Street South became available in 2003 and now opens into the original building. Open offices for job counsellors and their clients occupy the main floor. Particularly noteworthy are the original, newly painted double doors opening onto Queen Street and the use of original brick and wood panelling that constitute the walls. Overlooking the main floor is a mezzanine where Stephanie and others have their offices. A long hallway takes us to a modern industrial kitchen where all the food for the café is prepared and which provides training for future chefs and restaurant workers. Maurita's Kitchen, as it is called, is named for a former long-time board member Maurita McCrystal, whose support and passion for The Working Centre were alive right up until her untimely death three years ago.



Maurita would have relished the delicious and nutritious offerings prepared by many willing hands.

A very busy computer refurbishing and recycling project operates in the basement while affordable apartments for single people and families in transition are located on the top floor.

We leave Queen Street now for a short walk over to 97 Victoria Street North. This old industrial building has been occupied until recently by the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Mutual interest brought them into partnership with The Working Centre and a complete renovation has resulted in Worth a Second Look, a very attractive store in which to browse and shop for bargains in household goods and furnishings. A particularly exciting addition to the store is a bright corner for a good selection of used books. This is the pet project of another board member, Roman Dubinski, who in retirement continues to offer his knowledge and skills as an English professor. Sharing this space is a project called the Job Café where part-time work for those seeking to augment their incomes can be found. Laundry facilities and showers are available to provide integrated support throughout the building.

But that's not all! Ascending stairs to the second floor, we enter the most modern and efficient community kitchen you are likely to find anywhere. This is the new St John's Kitchen, welcoming people in need for breakfast and/or a nutritious daily meal and a chance to socialize with others.

Two innovative collaborative programs reach out from St. John's Kitchen to people on the street. They include the Downtown Street Outreach Program supported by the Kitchener Downtown Business Association and the Psychiatric Outreach Program supported by the Region of Waterloo and The Hallman Foundation. These programs are a resource and a source of support for those with many needs.

This virtual tour of The Working Centre would not be complete without brief mention of two projects far away in India and Kenya. Geeta Vaidyanathan, an architect doing graduate studies at the University of Waterloo, volunteered at The Working Centre. She lent her expertise to the planning and designing of the renovations and came to appreciate The Working Centre's philosophy, ideas for development, and its grassroots, inclusive style of working. It was here at The



Working Centre that an idea to benefit her home country took shape and began to grow. Eventually Geeta and her engineer husband returned to Orrisa, India. They designed and were able to secure funding to create a biodiesel pump project using locally available resources to provide running water and electricity to the village. Joe and Stephanie are part of an informal international board of directors for the project.

Similarly, an initial visit to The Working Centre by the director of the Ugunja Community Resource Centre has resulted in a student exchange program. Four Kenyans have gained experience here, while four young people from The Working Centre have volunteered in Kenya. Incidentally, a collection taken up at St John's Kitchen was given to the first Kenyan, Charles, as a going away present to sponsor the purchase of a cow for his village.

Today fifty-five full and part-time staff and over 300 precious volunteers support over twenty-five Working Centre projects and provide a very hospitable community space. Come and see!



Weaving Hospitality

Issue 132, March 2018

By Joe Mancini

St. John's Kitchen is a place of relationships. From its first meal served on January 15 1985, it has been a refuge in downtown Kitchener. In December of 1984, the community was waiting for this new place to open. Anna Kaljas wrote in a letter to the Kitchener Record asking why the fire department was holding up the opening of the Kitchen. Anna stated emphatically in her letter that people needed a place where the community could serve a daily meal for those in need.

32 years later, St. John's Kitchen continues to be a place that serves a free daily meal in downtown Kitchener while fostering a unique kind of belonging.

Grace, dignity, mutuality, and generosity have made St. John's Kitchen a place of meaningful daily exchanges. Creating a place of attachment where the community's effort to produce and serve the daily meal is complimented by relationships that overflow. It is often a place of contradictions. It is not one group over the other but the recognition of the human condition, that we are all broken and that we can help each other.

How did such a place take root? At this year's Mayors' Dinner, Arleen Macpherson, Gretchen Jones, and Jennifer Mains will tell the story of St. John's Kitchen, how it has endured as a place of relationships.

These three women have been essential to the St. John's Kitchen community over these 30 years.

When Arleen retired in 1999 she used the words belonging, laughter, understanding, gratitude, hospitality, and openness to describe St. John's Kitchen. What she meant by those words was a description of the culture she encountered each day. "Food is an important part of St. John's Kitchen," Arleen wrote, "it is around food that we gather to recognize our common humanity and to establish a sense of belonging."



Arleen weaved hospitality into the fabric of St. John's Kitchen, often writing about the courage, simplicity, and generosity that was an everyday occurrence at the Kitchen. Arleen considered St. John's Kitchen to be a "wonderful meeting and gathering place."

The Miracle on Duke and Water by Dave Conzani conveyed the friendship he encountered at St. John's Kitchen. Today we understand that Dave was a survivor of the 60's scoop, taken away from his aboriginal mother when he was only 3 years old. Arleen and Gretchen were important supports to Dave as he moved past his alcohol addiction. A few years later he wrote poignantly about his experience:

"Later I came to meet the two dearest women I have ever known. I can't count how many times I sat at my table drunk and cried my heart out to them about grief over my lost son, my inability to quit drinking and the cold stark horrors of my life on skid-row. They sat and heard my pain for hours, and though I reeked of alcohol, and hadn't bathed for God knows how long, and had only that one filthy change of clothes I was wearing, they gave me a hug of encouragement and never batted an eye of disgust. I know because I looked for it and it wasn't there."

Gretchen first started volunteering in 1991 and soon was an integral part of St. John's Kitchen, coordinating the kitchen and volunteers for 26 years. Gretchen has been a big part of the magic that happens each day to ensure the daily meal is served. Her work has been to invite the many from the floor and from the community to work together. The distinctiveness of the kitchen is its open structure. There is an overriding trust that people working together can take the gift of food and turn it into a meal shared by the community.

Gretchen knows the feel of community. She is often in the middle of it as up to 40 people go about the work of chopping vegetables, keeping the coffee pot filled, washing dishes, scraping pots, cleaning tables, and mopping the floor, all ensuring that community is built through the daily meal.

Jennifer started coordinating St. John's Kitchen in 1999 and for 19 years has been committed to developing ever-increasing supports for those most disadvantaged. Jennifer questioned right away why there were so few resources at the grassroots for those most marginalized. As Gabor Maté noted: "*why is it that those who face the*



greatest challenges face a system that ostracizes, marginalizes, impoverishes and refuses to provide the means for support to move past addictions?"

Over time new social supports took shape at St. John's Kitchen that included Downtown Street Outreach, Hospitality House, Psychiatric Outreach and the St. John's Kitchen medical and dental clinics.

For Jennifer what matters most is creating a place where the work of community is seeking beauty. She described this way of thinking and how it relates to St. John's Kitchen in a Good Work News article in December 2012.

"The framework in which we work is one of understanding the role of beauty in our lives. We do the work because we are seeking beauty in the other, celebrating the spirit in the other and renewing our own.

"We have frequent outreach meetings in which we carefully listen to each other, hoping to gain counsel, support, or a broadening of our understanding but at one particular meeting I was struck by the focus of the dialogue. I heard the outreach workers speak with delight and vigour about their work during the past week, naming situations where they saw insight, caring, and compassion, the human spirit rising. This is not to say that their week was not also filled with anger, despair, and desolation. But the conversation was not about what was pathological, wrong or negative. They spoke of peoples' desires, their hopes and wishes.

"Instead of goals we prefer the practice of walking with the other, which has the possibility of giving dignity to their experience and allows us to be open to the mystery of the human spirit."

The Mayors' Dinner will celebrate the culture that has grown in downtown Kitchener at St. John's Kitchen. We often remember a quote by our friend Myrta Riveras who used to say, "She would not like to be in a city that did not have a St. John's Kitchen." This celebration is recognition that for 32 years our community has created a place of friendship and hospitality open to all with no questions asked.



Telling the Story of St. John's Kitchen

Issue 133, June 2018

by Joe Mancini

970 people packed Marshall Hall at Bingemans to celebrate the 31st Mayors' Dinner. This year the evening highlighted the story of St. John's Kitchen by recognizing three women who have been part of St. John's Kitchen for over 30 years. Arleen Macpherson, Gretchen Jones, and Jennifer Mains form a continuum of service that has ensured that St. John's Kitchen has been a place of respect and dignity for all who come for a meal.

St. John's Kitchen has served a meal of necessity for 32 years. The evening recognized the pure and beautiful effort of so many people to take surplus food and from those gifts create a meal to serve the greater good of the community. These actions make hospitality and service come alive each day.

Early in the evening the role of St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church was acknowledged as the first home for St. John's Kitchen between 1985 and 2006. St. John's Church filled three tables at the dinner showing their ongoing support for this project.

Since 1985 St. John's Kitchen has been a place of refuge in downtown Kitchener. The doors at St. John's Kitchen open at 8:00 A.M., where a continental breakfast is served. This is also the time when the food preparation begins for the 400 meals that are served each day. The volunteer effort to serve this continuous meal is a story that in itself is truly remarkable.

Another story that grows from St. John's Kitchen is the development of an integrated hub which makes St. John's Kitchen an important place that provides immediate supports each day. These services of support include outreach workers who are available to walk with people through challenges with legal, income, and housing issues, the showers and laundry service, and the medical clinic with a doctor, a nurse practitioner, nurses, and outreach support. There is also the Hospitality



House, the bunkies, and the dental clinic, all focused on serving those who find themselves either homeless or in constant upheaval.

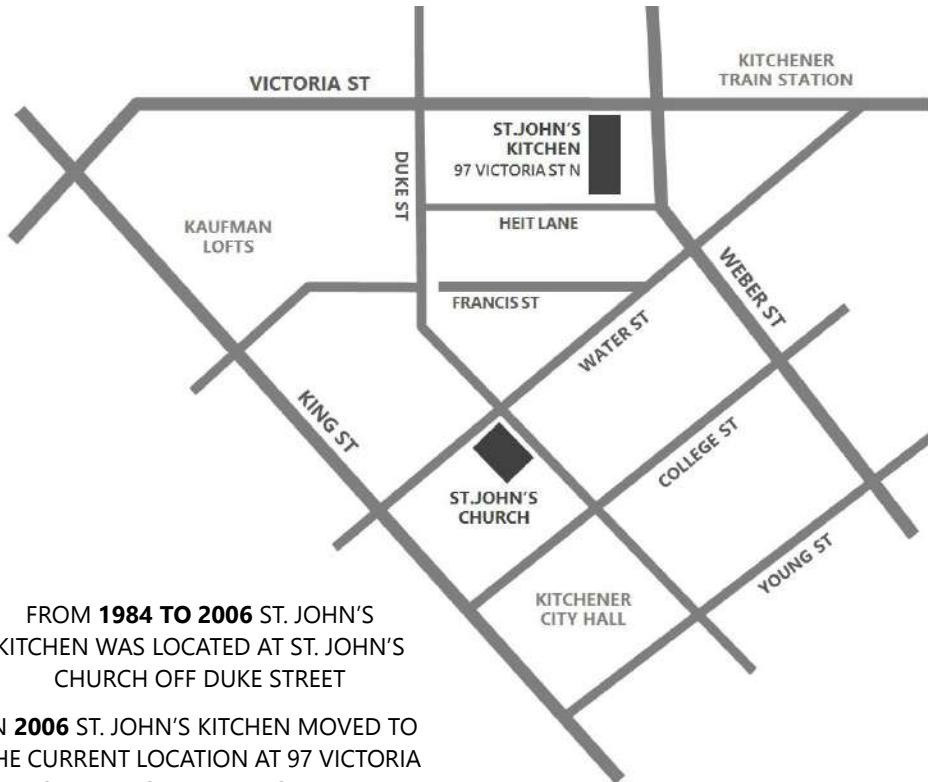
The highlight of the evening was the use of video clips about St. John's Kitchen using the themes of Inclusion, the Space of St. John's Kitchen, and Access. Patrons and workers described the vitality of St. John's Kitchen through these themes, traveling over the 30 years of St. John's Kitchen giving hints to how this project has vitally rooted in downtown Kitchener.

The strength of the evening was in the six stories told by Arleen, Gretchen, and Jennifer that captured the spirit of St. John's Kitchen. The stories journeyed with the people who have been part of St. John's Kitchen describing the rich and colourful history of walking together. These stories demonstrated how the serving of food builds community. Each story layered upon the other describing a growing community of outreach. In one story, Jennifer framed the pain and frustration of one person through his question, "Who cares about me?"

Arleen, Gretchen, and Jennifer ended the evening by inviting everyone to take home the table graphic created by Andy Macpherson (Arleen's son). The graphic summarized the themes of the night, "We flourish and blossom when we give and receive love and understanding" and "Seek beauty in the other." Jennifer ended by asking, "does seeking beauty in the other pave the way for unconditional love?"

It was a wonderful celebration of the 30 years that Arleen, Gretchen, and Jennifer have offered in the work of nurturing a community of support in the Kitchener downtown. All who attended learned about how this 30 year journey of serving a free community meal has created deep friendships and commitment. Thank you to the many people who helped to make this a meaningful community celebration.

A Timeline of Community Support



FROM **1984 TO 2006** ST. JOHN'S KITCHEN WAS LOCATED AT ST. JOHN'S CHURCH OFF DUKE STREET

IN **2006** ST. JOHN'S KITCHEN MOVED TO THE CURRENT LOCATION AT 97 VICTORIA STREET NORTH IN KITCHENER



Arleen Macpherson, Gretchen Jones, and Jennifer Mains are honoured at the 31st annual Mayors' Dinner, April 2018.



Top: (left-right) Arleen Macpherson, Kitchener Mayor Berry Vrbanovic, Gretchen Jones, Cambridge Mayor Doug Craig, Jennifer Mains, Waterloo Mayor Dave Jaworsky

Bottom: The extended Macpherson family at the 31st annual Mayors' Dinner, April 2018



On May 1, 1933, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin printed the first edition of The Catholic Worker newspaper, distributing it for a penny a copy to workers in New York's Union Square. That act sparked a movement which today encompasses over 150 communities in 8 countries. The aim of the Catholic Worker is to create a new society in the shell of the old where it is easier for people to be good enough through the Gospel practices of voluntary poverty, active non-violence, manual labour, personal responsibility for the works of mercy, communal prayer and living

Ultimately, the Catholic Worker envisions the achievement of a green revolution, a decentralized society where people from all walks of life return to the land to create and share sustainable communities rooted in the earth, the seasons and common good work freely offered for the common good. In accordance with the principles of anarchism and personal responsibility, there is no one to ask permission for beginning to live Catholic Worker: the important thing is to get started.

The Catholic Worker has been an inspiration for The Working Centre; many of the themes in this Catholic Worker drawing continue to resonate in our work and inspire.