

Fiorito: A hot breakfast on a cold morning



By Joe Fiorito Columnist
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The men and women who sleep in the shelters of our city, on slender mattresses and under thin sheets, are turned out onto the streets at 6 a.m.

Why?

I have been told that this allows time for the shelters to be cleaned. Oh. I see. We may therefore remain untroubled by the sight of a man or woman on a grate in the early hours, secure in the knowledge that somewhere a mattress is being turned, and sheets are being washed.

But there is one good true thing which rises above the institutional cruelty of the day: the winter breakfast program at St. John the Compassionate, on Broadview a few steps north of Queen, has just started up for the winter; doors open, no surprise, at 6 a.m.

The coffee had been brewed and the smell of it filled the air when I arrived; there were doughnuts on a table, the eggs awaited scrambling, and the frying pans were hot and ready for dollops of pancake batter.

As the men and women came in from the cold with their backpacks, Joanna Dunn watched over them, and while she did she gave me a history lesson.

“Six years ago, the shelter up the street, the people were saying they got kicked out at 6 a.m. I told Father Roberto and he said, ‘What do you want to do about it?’”

You put that sort of question to her and you know you’ll get results. Joanna said, “It started with coffee and a warm place to be. I don’t cook. But we got funding, and the Father got people cooking from the parish.” The mission now serves 70 breakfasts every day, Monday to Friday, and the place was packed by 7 a.m.

Joanna said, “I know half the people here. Some of them live in the community, some of them live at Jilly’s.” Jilly’s is a peeler bar in a handsome old building on Queen at Broadview; rooms for rent on the upper floors. She said, “Some come from rooming houses, and some are from the shelters.” And a handful have addictions, and all of them are hungry. Joanna said, “We stay open until 9 a.m.” What happens at 9 a.m.? “That’s when the libraries open, and the drop-in at Woodgreen, and maybe the mall.”

Warm places, free places.

A woman named Cynthia was greeting people as they came in. She said, “I only do the breakfast program. I volunteer at some other places, too. I like meeting people.”

There were some men sitting at a table, so I got coffee and joined them. Sean said, “I’m a volunteer here. I was doing community service.”

Pat — and under no circumstances should you ever call her Pattycake — said, “I started years ago, same as him, community service.”

Mike said, “I was coming here to eat every day. I heard the word ‘volunteer.’ All the people, doing different jobs. I’m giving back from what I got.”

John said, “I work in the bakery next door. I volunteer here. I’m the door man.”

They were keeping track of the number of guests, but they did not bother to tally the cat from the house next door who wandered in to rub up against the legs of the people having breakfast, nice kitty, there’s a good kitty.

Joanna said, “You can have the angriest guy, and the cat will come over and cheer him up. The cat has a brother, but his brother snobs us.”

Life’s like that.

And by the time the libraries and the drop-ins were opening down the street, the kitchen staff had scrambled seven cartons of eggs, 18 eggs to a carton; they had turned two big boxes of mix into pancakes; and the hungry men and women had washed down the doughnuts and bagels with a dozen litres of milk and 125 cups of coffee; get it while it's hot.

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