

## **“God is telling me we should start a soup kitchen”**

The origins of the Soup Kitchen at St. Thomas of Canterbury are murky enough that a flier for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary featured “To Tell the Truth: Who Started the Soup Kitchen?” as part of its entertainment.

But whatever the specifics, most agree that Terry Gates, who lived at the St. Francis Catholic Worker House in Uptown in 1978, was the one who first had the idea.

The Catholic Worker Movement was founded by Servant of God Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, designed to facilitate direct practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy by sharing the lives of the poor, most notably in houses of hospitality that provided shelter for those in need.

Terry had originally come to the house in Uptown as a guest after a car accident and family estrangement, and in the words of

Jim Eder, who was also living at the Catholic Worker house at the time, “she became our poster girl, as she healed physically, spiritually, mentally.” She approached Jim with the idea for the soup kitchen first, arguing that it was in the tradition of soup lines begun by Catholic Workers during the Great Depression.

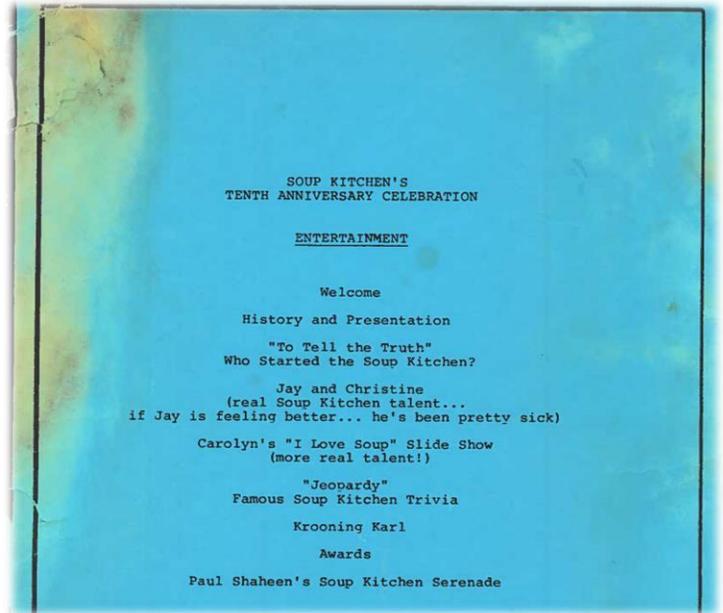
He pointed out that the house already had about 20 guests to its five members, who could “barely keep [the house] open.”

“She said, ‘No, Jim, you don't understand, God is telling me we should start a soup kitchen,’” Jim recounted. “So in my great love for the poor and my kindly spirit and my wonderful nature and my generous spirit, I said, ‘Well, you and God are going to have to do it, because it's a dumb idea, and it'll never work. And you can't do it.’ And then she said, ‘Well, I'm going to go down and ask Fr. Rochford if we can use the [St. Thomas of Canterbury] church basement.’ And I said, ‘Good!’ because I figured: Oh, the priest'll kill this.”

Fr. Rochford, who was pastor at St. Thomas of Canterbury a couple blocks north of the Catholic Worker House, did the opposite; he opened the basement for operations. Several parishioners at St. Thomas of Canterbury were also involved in the soup kitchen from its inception. Jim recalled Francis Romano and Wanda Joseph specifically.

“It started as a mutual endeavor from the Catholic Worker House, and the St. Thomas of Canterbury social justice outreach program,” he explained.

Over time, the soup kitchen became more of a parish entity, with more involvement from St. Thomas of Canterbury, though Catholic Workers continued to have a presence at different points. Jim was perhaps the prime example. Though he was not involved in the



first year or so of the soup kitchen, he would eventually find himself in the position of Temporary Director – a role he has held since 1979 and one that outlasted his involvement in the Catholic Worker.

But all that would come later. The soup kitchen did not have an auspicious first night.

In theory, the need was obvious. In 1978, the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago, where St. Thomas is located, was “one of the poorest neighborhoods” in the city, according to Denise Plunkett, who lived at the St. Francis Catholic Worker house at the time.

“Uptown was always poor people,” she said. “A lot of senior citizens, a lot of homeless and down and out.”

During the 1970s, the region was a melting pot in a city already renowned for its variety of populations. As redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s hit the Old Town and Lincoln Park neighborhoods north of downtown, the poor in those neighborhoods were displaced as rents rose.<sup>1</sup> They went north, to Uptown – along with migrants from Appalachia and the South, who had moved to Chicago seeking employment.<sup>2</sup> As deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals swept the country starting in the 1960s, Uptown ended up taking in an estimated 7,000 of discharged patients.<sup>3</sup>



*Bob Chaps (with grandchild)*

Add in rampant “arson for profit” among landlords in the neighborhood to collect insurance on the destroyed buildings and replace them with newer structures,<sup>4</sup> and the result was “a scary place,” according to Bob Chaps. He was part of the St. Francis Catholic Worker House on at 4652 N. Kenmore during the late 1970s and worked with the soup kitchen in its early years.

“[Uptown] was a cool, cool place – probably like Heaven on earth because it was such a diverse community,” he said. “It was the point of entry for all the immigrants of Chicago, so we had Vietnamese, Filipino, the mentally ill people, the elderly, gangs. It was an incredible melting pot. But it was scary.”

With such an array of people pushed to the margins, it was only logical that some of them could use the help of a meal.

Terry Gates, Denise Plunkett, Helen McFadden, Fr. Tom Florek SJ, Bill O'Brien, and Maxine Florell – all at or working with the Catholic Worker House at the time – came to help at St. Thomas of Canterbury on the first night, Denise recalled.

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<sup>1</sup> Rehak, Bob. [Uptown: Portrait of a Chicago Neighborhood in the Mid-1970s](#), pg. 9

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Guevarra, Anna and Reddy, Gayatri, *Dis/Placements: A People's History of Uptown, Chicago*, “[Community Fights Arson for Profit by Slumlords in Uptown](#)” [dis-placements.com](#)

“We get there the first night and Maxine has this big vat of a beans and rice kind of crumble, and not a soul came but ourselves, and we were just looking around the empty basement,” she said.

Fr. Florek took a page from the Gospel of Luke, specifically Luke 14:12-14, and “went out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town” to find guests. He walked over to the Wilson L stop and brought six men back to join the six volunteers, where “they enjoyed a hearty meal of all they could eat,” Denise said.

“They let their friends know, and the numbers doubled the following week to about 12 -15, the third week maybe 25 - 30, then very quickly the numbers exploded to about 100 -125, and kept growing to about 250,” she added.

As the soup kitchen continued to grow, Jim Eder found himself more involved despite his initial resistance. At first, this was because he was, in his estimation, the only one mopping the floors adequately after the soup kitchen ended, and then he found himself, in his words, “the most responsible person there at the end.”

“At one point my name just appeared in the parish bulletin as Director of the Soup Kitchen, so I went to Fr. Rochford, who was still there, and I said, ‘Father, what’s this?’ and he said, ‘Well, you’re the only one down there that’s not totally crazy.’ And he was talking about the volunteers, not the guests,” Jim recalled. “He said, ‘So you’re in charge!’ I said, ‘No, no!’ and he said, ‘Yes, you are.’ I said, ‘Okay, I’ll do it until someone else comes along, so put me down as Temporary Director.’ ... That was 1979.”



*Jim Eder*

When Jim successfully withstood two punches from a rowdy guest at one of the soup kitchen nights, his position as “temporary” director was fully solidified

“I’ve picked up guys physically and thrown them out,” he said. “I always say my autobiography is going to be: I Was a

Bouncer for Jesus.”

### **“I’ll go up in the church and pray for protection.”**

It was a necessary role, given the situation in Uptown at the time. The soup kitchen numbers saw a spike as deinstitutionalization of mentally ill people in the U.S. gathered momentum. With Uptown absorbing so many of those patients, the environment of the soup kitchen began to get out of hand. By the 1980s, according to Jim, it was serving about 500-600. When the Salvation Army at Broadway and Sunnyside closed temporarily, those numbers spiked even higher to 900.

At this point, he was nearing his limits.

“We had a lot of people who had been institutionalized for their whole lives, and they were down there, and it was like one fight after another after another, and I was getting burnt out,” he said. “Because it was getting dangerous.”

That led to discussions about whether it would be better for the soup kitchen to shut down altogether. But Mark Miller, who had arrived with the Jesuit Volunteers, had a different thought.

“We were talking about maybe we needed to close,” Jim recalled. “And Mark said, ‘I’ll go up and pray. I’ll go up in the church and pray for protection.’ And a couple people joined him – and it was a remarkable change.”

That began the custom of having intercessory prayer for the work of the soup kitchen in the church while people were being served food in the basement below. Vespers and Benediction were added to the prayers sometime in the mid-1980s, Eder said, and both those devotions are still held on Tuesday night.

It was also during the 1980s that the soup kitchen began to accept volunteers from universities and parish schools in and around Chicago. Groups came in from Loyola University and various Catholic high schools, and St. Thomas of Canterbury also had several ‘sharing’ parishes, who would send their students and young people to volunteer and bring donations of food and clothing, Denise Plunkett recalled.

These included St. Francis Xavier in Wilmette, Queen of All Saints Basilica, and Mary, Seat of Wisdom, to name a few.

“These parishes would bring kids in buses, or the families would drive kids, or the youth leaders would somehow get them there,” she said. “Other groups from those parishes might bring food; maybe they prepared something tasty in the way of a dessert, [so] that dish was used.”

As time passed, many of the Catholic Workers initially involved in the soup kitchen began to move on for various reasons. One was the decision to accept government food assistance a year or two after the soup kitchen began. There were objections to this, Jim said, due to the Catholic Worker principle that the Church was the institution that should feed the hungry, rather than the state. And as more outside groups such as students and youth from other parishes became involved, more of the older volunteers departed.

But the Catholic Worker ethos, particularly personalism and Christian anarchy, continued to inform the soup kitchen experience for both the guests and volunteers, Jim said.

“Very much part of what the soup kitchen was is that we don't look to the government, we don't look to the church, we don't look to anybody, we look to us to do the job,” he explained.



*The Blessed Sacrament at St. Thomas*

That means treating the guests of the soup kitchen as guests, not as clients or cases to be managed. Volunteers wait tables to this day and will stop to chat with guests as time and serving duties permit – a choice made deliberately to make sure people did not have to stand in line to get their food.



*Volunteers pray before the start of the soup kitchen (2009)*

That principle was present even in the soup kitchen's early days, Denise said, when sometimes hundreds of guests necessitated people standing in line.

“If there was any food left, we all grabbed food and just sat at different tables,” she said. “We never wanted people to feel less than.”

Dorsey Jastrebski and her family found the soup kitchen when they started attending St. Thomas, when Fr. Richard Simon served as pastor (he served at St. Thomas from 1986 to 2006). Dorsey has been volunteering with her

entire family at the soup kitchen since the 1990s, and this attitude toward the guests has been a constant of their experience, she said.

“Everybody feels like they're welcome here, they're kind of part of family,” she said. “Fr. Simon's big deal was: We just feed the poor; we're not going to lecture. Because other places you, you have to listen to the talk, you have to take the whatever, and he was like, ‘No, we're not doing any of that.’”

This is particularly important because for so many people who come, there is nowhere else to go, Bob Chaps pointed out.

“They've just burned every bridge in the world sometimes,” he said. “They're not there because they want to be, really.”

That makes treating the guests respect all the more paramount, because for so many of the guests, they have nowhere else that will bear witness to their human dignity. Jim always emphasized for the volunteers that the work they did was an extension of the Mass, according to Steve Paliakas, who began his work with the soup kitchen in 1996.

Wende Paliakas – she and Steve met at the soup kitchen and got engaged in front of the Blessed Sacrament in St. Thomas while the soup kitchen was in operation – also stressed this as a core pillar of the soup kitchen.

“One of the things Jim [Eder] would always tell us before we opened the doors ... is that sitting down at a table and looking someone in the eye and talking to them and treating them with dignity and listening to their stories would be a bigger physic to them than the hot bowl of soup,” she said. “So he would tell us: Grab a bowl of soup yourself and sit down and eat with them. It's the dignity of each person as a person.”

The soup kitchen often became a space where that would emerge, Steve Paliakas pointed out, such as a guest with incredible musical talent playing the piano while others dined.

“You see a lot of brokenness in humanity, but once you scratch the surface, you really see the dignity and that is from God himself,” he said.

### **‘Did they die during this thing? Did they just move away?’**

The COVID-19 pandemic struck daily life in the U.S. with a vengeance in March of 2020, shutting down major institutions of American life such as sporting leagues, conventions, restaurants, and places of worship for months.

The soup kitchen did not close. Instead, it overhauled how it conducted operations to serve soup, salad, sandwiches and coffee from the steps of St. Thomas of Canterbury.

There was a morning crew, an afternoon crew, and an evening crew, both to maintain social distance and to separate the volunteer into teams to prevent the entire staff from having to go into quarantine if someone tested positive for COVID-19. In masks, gloves and head coverings, they would prepare the different components of the soup kitchen meal over the course of the day. The morning crew would set up to-go bags with salt, pepper, cream, sugar, utensils, napkins, sandwiches and other items that could be left out for a given period, Dorsey explained. Another team came in around noon to chop vegetables and prepare for cooking the soup, and then an evening crew would make the soup and distribute it at the door.

“I remember buying heaters for that so they wouldn’t be freezing their butts off,” she recalled.

But even though the soup kitchen was able to stay in operation, it simply was not the same experience for the guests or the volunteers. As a St. Thomas of Canterbury outreach ministry newsletter from Spring 2020 noted, “the Soup Kitchen is as much about community as it is about food.”

In concrete terms, for the guests, it was harder even than just not having a place to sit and eat, Dorsey pointed out.

“It would be the effort to get here, and then however long it takes them – an hour, depending on where they live or if they had to walk or bus or a combo – and then they just have to pick up their bag and turn around and go back,” she said. “There’s no place to rest and sit down and warm up. So a lot of people weren’t able to come, they just couldn’t manage it.”

Before the pandemic, the soup kitchen was seeing roughly 100 guests a night. But because of all those challenges, the numbers took a hit and have not recovered; by fall 2021, the soup kitchen was seeing about 60 to 70 guests a night.



*Dorsey Jastrebski*

The change has been worrisome for Dorsey. Guests that she has seen for years vanished during the pandemic, with no way to find out what happened.

“You wonder: did they die during this thing? Did they just move away?” she said. “People here don’t really share their contact information all the time, so you just ask other people that you knew hung with them, ‘Do you know? Have you seen them?’ And they’re like, ‘No, I haven’t.’ It’s kind of crazy.”

But the other looming factor in the lower numbers is change in the Uptown neighborhood itself. As of 2021, it was gentrifying rapidly. One example: The elegant Lawrence House residence that overlooks

the soup kitchen used to be housing for those who were either low-income or had disabilities.

When Dorsey started volunteering, the soup kitchen would see roughly 300 people a night.

“More than COVID, I think it’s the gentrifying of the neighborhood,” she said of the smaller numbers in 2021. “Literally, they’ve been talking about it for decades: It’s going to gentrify, it’s going to gentrify. But now they really did. They started taking over a lot of the buildings... just made into regular fancy housing.”

If this trend continues, it may have to mean changes for the soup kitchen, though as Eder observed, it is likely that “the poor will always be with us.”

**“You just have a real sense of the Holy Spirit here.”**

For the volunteers, what they took from their service at the soup kitchen far outweighed the discomfort or work involved.

“You get more than you give. I know that’s a saying, a cliché, but it’s true,” Bob Chaps said, commenting on how glad he was to see the number of student volunteers from Loyola University. “I think being able to share the soup kitchen with others is a positive thing.”

For Lynn Miller, this aspect of sharing was how she learned of the soup kitchen’s existence in late 1979. She heard Chaps and Plunkett speak at St. Clement’s in Lincoln Park, and even though “it was really out of my comfort zone,” as she recalled, “it just spoke to me.”

“I took the Broadway bus up there my first time,” she said. “It was in Lent, it was in March, and then I was pulled right into the Easter meal and helping with that and cooking for that.”

Lynn ended up living at the Catholic Worker House, working at St. Thomas of Canterbury, and then meeting her husband, Mark Miller, at the soup kitchen when he came as part of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. And she practiced personalism firsthand; Lynn was working as an occupational therapist and described herself as having no credentials. But she was

performing outreach for the parish in many different levels, as were many others despite ostensibly being unqualified.

For her, it opened a new world, both in the sense that once she became immersed in the work, “never again was I out of my comfort zone,” but also in the sense of new horizons internally.



*Lynn Miller (with grandchild Valeria)*

“I was not really used to doing anything that charitable,” she recalled. “Not that I was a mean person, I just didn’t think about it, more about going out with friends, dating. And that wasn’t really working. There was a void, an emptiness, and I think that’s what put me on the track to seek God’s stuff.”

That experience of God’s work in the service needs to be given to college and high-school students, who might otherwise avoid many of the people the soup kitchen serves, Jim Eder said. The soup kitchen provides an opportunity for the students to recognize the humanity of those individuals, by making genuine interaction possible.

“I would tell them that it’s very important for them to interact with the guests as far as you’re comfortable,” Eder said. “That’s the main purpose I want them to have, is to interact with the guests as much as you are comfortable.

Now if that means all that you can do is pass out food and be there, that’s fine. But try to do it with a smile. Try to say: ‘Do you want another bowl of soup?’ Or: ‘Is there anything else I can get you?’ Just try to break the ice [and] if you learn that someone wants and needs conversation, then you do that. You don’t give them the bum’s rush.”

Dorsey, Bob, Lynn Miller, and the Paliakases all agreed that the soup kitchen does more for the volunteers than it does for the guests. For Dorsey, it was a defining experience for her, her husband, and their five children; she and her husband homeschooled their children, which allowed them time to bring them to different volunteer opportunities at the soup kitchen. As a result, many of the guests knew her children as they grew up and still ask how they are doing, she said.

“That’s such a great thing, just to be able to give of yourself to people and just to serve each other,” she said. “It’s been a great experience for my kids; they’ve all grown up with a heart for God because of that, I think.”

Prayer and Vespers – which take place every Tuesday night – form another essential component. Then there is always some form of fellowship, which began with the volunteers going to a German restaurant for a beer after the soup kitchen, evolved into going into the rectory for a beer and perhaps a Cubs game – and now continues in the form of some kind of food, beer and time together after the soup kitchen on Fridays.

“That's part of the ethos too. It was that combination of service, prayer and fellowship,” Jim said. “That was really what made it as strong as it is. Because it's not just a place where you went.”

Dorsey agreed, pointing to both the change wrought by intercessory prayer in the 80s and to other incidents – ranging from violent guests being removed summarily by mysterious strangers to a cook coming out of nowhere when needed – as signs of something deeper at work.

“You just have a real sense of the Holy Spirit here,” she said.



*Re-opening to diners after the COVID lockdown (July 2021)*