

People of the Year in Religion: HHI volunteers

Sheltering the homeless, uniting everyone else

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Each night from December through March, dozens of volunteers from over 25 churches and synagogues in Huntington Township quietly collaborate to house and feed the homeless under the auspices of The Huntington Interfaith Homeless Initiative.

The network of volunteers quietly yet industriously keeps HHI running and, for their efforts, The Times of Northport honors them as People of the Year in Religion.

HHI began in the winter of 2004 when Family Service League became aware of people living in the woods in Huntington, said Frances Whittelsey, one of the founders of HHI. "Day laborers were setting up camp, and they still do it. One man was found dead," she added.

Peggy Boyd, FSL's coordinator for HHI, said, "We started the program in 2004 in response to learning that we had homeless in Huntington that would not or could not utilize the county shelter system."

Jan Brenner, HHI coordinator for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, said, "It really saves lives, especially in a winter like last year. We see it as a safety measure."

Boyd worked with Whittelsey and the UUFH to house the homeless people. Working off the East End model program Maureen's Haven, "We asked several churches ... seven religious organizations agreed to open up their facilities for them, for each night of the week," Whittelsey said.

Boyd said, "We are fortunate that we have over 20 different houses of worship who have provided respite over the years from Dec. 1 to March 30."

Each evening around 5 pm, up to 25 homeless people are picked up in Huntington Station and brought to one of the designated hosting sites; other arrangements are made if there are more than 25 homeless on a given night. "They get a warm dinner, toiletries to clean themselves and some form of entertainment, like cards or a video," Whittelsey said.

In the early morning, the people are then given breakfast and a bag lunch, and are picked up and taken back to try to get work for the day.

Some of the hosting sites offer additional services to the workers, including English language instruction, Alcoholics Anonymous, haircuts and dental care. "Each site has made it very special, utilizing volunteers who offer a special service," said Boyd.

Temple Beth El, which houses the workers on a designated night of every week, has coordinated with Northport High School's Students for 60,000, a social action club that helps people in the USA and Central America. "The students interact with the clients, working with English skills, helping with distribution of clothing, interpreting at haircut appointments," said Lisa Flanagan, adviser for Students for 60,000. "Our goal is to give the clients better English skills, so they can represent themselves better at interviews for jobs or housing. Some of the students have built relationships with the men because there are the same ones there each [week]."

Through the worldwide Tzu Chi Foundation, Temple Beth El has also been able to offer dental care, said Carol Werblin, the temple's HIHI coordinator. "I wanted to have some kind of preventative care, so we could stop the emergencies. We have a wonderful group of Temple members. I say, 'This is what I need,' and they are there for me. It's a lot of fun to do good."

Temple Beth El volunteer Maryanne Prepault has been donating her time and services, one day each month to cut the workers' hair. "They look forward to it. And she just loves it," Werblin said.

Flanagan said, "It's a great program. I'm very impressed with how Temple Beth El runs it."

Huntington Jewish Center became involved three seasons ago, collaborating with Temple Beth El. "We were looking for a project, and the rabbi was really into it," said Ellen Steinberg who co-chairs the HIHI committee with Karen Flanzenbaum. "It was very successful, so after that, we became a hosting site. Last year, we did five nights, and this year we will do seven nights. The whole program is volunteer. It is really amazing how many HJC people wanted to be involved. Mostly all the volunteers are buying the food. Not only are the people volunteering their time, but their money too."

Brenner said, "We get a lot of clothing donations ... It's really amazing how much is offered. It really does bring out the best in people."

Anne Canadeo coordinates HIHI for the Congregational Church of Huntington in Centerport, which is part of a team of four Huntington area churches that collaborate to cover one night a week.

"People are eager to work at the sites and, many times, they are coming to me before I even have the calendar out," she said. "Our team has two hosting sites — Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Centerport and St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Huntington. Centerport United Methodist Church and my church are the floaters" in that they don't host but provide volunteers, supplies and food at the hosting sites. "We bring videos, cards, Spanish language newspapers. We bring dinner and breakfast, and a bag lunch."

Not only does the program provide food and shelter for the homeless but it also provides a way for church or synagogue members to work together toward a common goal. Brenner, especially noticed this teamwork at UUFH.

"It's wonderful way for families to get to know each other," Brenner said.

To make all of this work, Canadeo said people of all different ages get involved. "Setting up involves a team, sometimes made up of teenagers, but sometimes, it's just me and my daughter. ... Senior citizens come and socialize with the guests. ... Students come and practice their Spanish and play dominoes, a popular pastime ... kids help decorate lunch bags," she added.

Brenner noticed a similar trend at UUFH. "It's a wonderful intergenerational program for people who otherwise would feel uncomfortable around the homeless," she said.

UUFH's program has instituted different programs for different age groups. Youths make up toiletry kits, and families cook and serve dinner together. Older kids can get community service hours that they need for school by helping out. Some of the older people who can't do some of the physical stuff provide chaperone service instead, Brenner said.

Canadeo has been impressed with the volunteers' positive and eager response. "The volunteer bug is contagious," she said. "Even when people don't have a lot to give financially, they can give their time. Adults are setting good examples for kids. Often, when they want to make a meal, they do it

with their children, and want to come and serve it to see who they are cooking for."

After watching her father help out with the program, CCH member Maya Dengler started a sock collection for the guests, Canadeo said.

Boyd said, "It's just a way that Huntington comes together to support our homeless."

Whittelsey added, "We were all hoping for federal action, some way of regularizing their situation. But the fact remains, we still have them out there in the dead of winter. While it is not a satisfactory solution, it is the best we've got. It's our obligation to keep people from freezing to death."

Though the program does not have a dearth of volunteers, it does require some money to run. "Years ago, grants were available, but now that times are tough, grants have dried up," said Canadeo. "We really are in an economic crunch now and HHIH needs financial support from the community."

Boyd added, "For nearly a decade, our congregations have provided a warm safe place for our homeless in Huntington. Over the years, we've counted on the generosity of many congregations and individuals to fund the program. Unfortunately, there has been a severe reduction in overall fundraising and in charitable giving, and as such, we begin the new season with a shortfall. We are looking to raise an additional \$25,000 immediately."

Editor's note: Donations may be sent to Family Service League (designating HHIH), 790 Park Ave., Huntington, NY 11743.