

Beans & Bread to celebrate 30 years

When amateur actor and former Benedictine priest Benet Hanlon began working in a Fells Point theater in the late 1970s, he noticed a number of homeless men along the then-scrappy waterfront streets, got to know several of them and eventually rented a small row house on Aliceanna Street in 1977 in an effort to feed them.

With the help of some friends, he converted the building into a soup kitchen - called it Beans & Bread in honor of the first meal he shared with a homeless man - and 30 years later that charitable enterprise dishes up 300 to 400 meals daily - plus a host of other services for Baltimore' poor.

To commemorate Beans & Bread's 30th anniversary, St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore will hold a week-long donation drive (Oct. 15-20) and five low-key events designed to show the public how the organization helps the homeless with dignity and respect.

There will be no elaborate party to celebrate the milestone, said John Schiavone, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul, the Catholic charitable organization that has managed Beans & Bread since 1986. St. Vincent de Paul also operates the adjacent Frederick Ozanam House, which provides transitional housing and services for formerly homeless men trying to make it on their own.

Instead, volunteers, donors and potential contributors will be invited to participate in the 30th Anniversary meal on Oct. 16 from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. A homelessness forum will be held Oct. 17 from 3:30-5 p.m. as well as an anniversary reception from 5-7 p.m. In addition, breakfast tours will be held from 8-11 a.m. on Oct. 18, which illustrate plans for the building expansion, renovation and service growth, and visitors can also see the meal program in action from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. on Oct. 18.

All of the events will take place at Beans & Bread's Fells Point facility at 402 S. Bond St.

"This is more in line with the nature of our program," said Mr. Schiavone, a parishioner of St. Ursula, Parkville. "With this, we get a chance to shine the light on our program in action, recognize the great work and contributions so many people have made to the homeless on a daily basis, and reflect on our mission, without doing it in an ostentatious manner."

Though Beans & Bread Director Kathleen Spain said she is proud the organization has thrived over the years and the tradition of dignity the program affords its homeless clients remains, she said the 30th anniversary comes with bittersweet feelings.

"It's really sad that we're still around and we need to expand our services," Ms. Spain said with a sigh. "On the other hand, 30 years is a long time for a service provider to be around and I think it's a testament to the program, how it's been run and how our clients are treated, that we are able to show what we're doing now, where we are going and how we're moving forward."

Charles and Sapphire Witherspoon are relieved the work continues at Beans & Bread and count on the facility for their survival.

The couple has been taking meals at the facility for the past three years and began using the day resource center when they became homeless about a year ago.

"That word - homeless - brings up so many bad images in folks' minds," said Ms. Witherspoon, 57. "There is nothing dignified about being homeless. But, they treat us so nicely when we come here. They don't make us feel ashamed. It's like we're coming to a restaurant, except we're not paying for our meal."

That was the philosophy Mr. Hanlon had when he began serving about 30 homeless people daily meals in 1977 in a row house set up like a restaurant, Ms. Spain said.

"The homeless would be greeted at the door, seated at a table and then served their meal," she said. "We've tried to continue that tradition. It helps you gain the trust of these people. It becomes easier to help them improve their lives when you gain their trust."

By 1986 Mr. Hanlon's soup kitchen was serving more than 100 people meals five days a week and he realized the operation needed to be overseen by a larger organization, Mr. Schiavone said.

"Mr. Hanlon looked for a partner who would share his approach of serving people in a manner that would uphold their dignity," he said. "Our patron saint - St. Vincent de Paul - was a champion of the poor. That appealed to Mr. Hanlon and we took over management of Beans & Bread."

Under the charitable organization's watch, Beans & Bread flourished. It expanded its services to include a day drop-in resource center where the homeless can get out of the heat in the summer and cold in the winter, use the telephone, bathroom, collect their mail and obtain clean, presentable clothes.

Shortly after the soup kitchen moved its operation from Aliceanna Street to Bond Street in 1992, Mr. Hanlon died at the age of 51, but the program continued to grow and it spawned off other services now provided on site, Ms Spain said.

Those services include transitional housing for the homeless at the Frederick Ozanam House and the Home Connections program, which provides people with their own apartments in an effort to help them better deal with the issues that led them to a life on the streets.

St. Vincent de Paul is currently about half way to raising the roughly \$3.8 million it needs to take over the building next door, renovate the two buildings and expand its program to – among many other things – allow the homeless to shower and do their laundry at the facility, Ms. Spain said.

“That is part of the idea of preserving human dignity,” she said. “If you have ever been here in the summer time, it becomes obvious that many of our clients haven’t had a chance to bathe or wash their clothes in some time. It’s harder for them to go on job interviews in that condition, or even apply for other services in government agencies.”

For Sister Eleanor Noll, O.S.B., a former director of Beans & Bread who continues to volunteer there, the anniversary reminds her there appears to be an endless need for volunteers and donations to keep the program functioning.

“The people from St. Joseph, Fullerton, have been with us from the early days and we have a great core of seniors helping us,” she said. “We always say we would love to go out of business. It seems forever there are people who are poor and hungry. So we are here to meet their needs.”

Though Mr. Schiavone understands that sentiment, he sees the mission of Beans & Bread as one that will always be required.

“Jesus said the poor will always be with us,” he said. “As people of faith, we should recognize that as Christians are called to respond to this. There needs to be an understanding there will always be a need to care for our brothers and sisters in this world who are in need.”