News



People enjoy dinner at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café, a restaurant-style community kitchen offering free meals in Kansas City, Missouri, as volunteers and staff serve them Feb. 26. (NCR photo/Maria Benevento)



by Maria Benevento

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"Is serving a meal to those in need enough?" Doug Langner kept asking himself.

The community kitchen at Bishop Sullivan Center — a nonprofit offering food, clothing, help with rent and utilities, employment services, and assistance for the elderly at three locations in the Kansas City metro area — had operated for around a quarter century.

But Langner, manager of Bishop Sullivan's Troost Avenue site, and others involved with the kitchen decided it should do more than fill people's stomachs with donated food.

One City Café, their newly renamed, remodeled and reorganized community kitchen, not only provides a free supper Monday through Friday but seeks to ensure the meal is healthy, delicious and served in a beautiful and dignified setting.

The hope has been "to make it more like a banquet, more like a restaurant, a great place where someone wants to come and eat, not just because they have to come and eat," Langner said.

He also hopes the café can help Troost Avenue — to Kansas City locals, often considered a dividing line between wealthier white neighborhoods to the west and poorer black ones to the east — become a bridge and not a wall.

The kitchen's attractive atmosphere, restaurant-style service, and involvement in a new program for Catholic college students are meant to encourage people of means to dine there, facilitate more interaction between volunteers and guests, and replace students' theories and stereotypes about poverty with real-life experience and human connection.

Exposed brick walls, colorful artwork and attractive light fixtures make the space look like "any kind of cool, urban chic restaurant that a lot of people are clamoring to go to in so many cities," Langner said.

Dwight Tiller, a professional chef who used to work for the Kansas City Chiefs, serving mostly millionaires, was hired to design and cook healthy, high-quality meals. Transitioning from cafeteria-style service to bringing meals to tables is another attempt to make the dining experience more dignified and enjoyable.

A piece of artwork at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café in Kansas City, Missouri (NCR pho

A piece of artwork at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café in Kansas City, Missouri (NCR photo/Maria Benevento)

In addition to the expense of the remodel, the Bishop Sullivan Center had to increase its budget for the kitchen in order to cook meals that don't rely entirely on donated food — although Langner said donated fresh produce is also being put to better use with Tiller's expertise.

"It's 100 percent worth it, seeing the transformation in people," Langner said, adding that the community has stepped up to support them. An option to sponsor a night at the kitchen — for a minimum of $150 — is so popular that on March 7 the next unsponsored date was May 31. Some nights are booked more than five months in advance.

"Everyone can understand how food is an important thing in every person's life, not just the physical act of eating, but how many moments do we have that are centered around food that we remember?" Langner said. "The same with our faith. ... The source and summit of our sacramental life is focused around a meal. I think it's something that most people understand and want to get behind."

The kitchen is careful not to prioritize fundraising over making people feel comfortable, though. After guests said they were self-conscious dining for free at pay-as-you-can restaurants that post suggested prices, One City Café opted to remain open to donations without asking for them during the meal.

"We were very intentional of not wanting to make it sound that we want something for every plate that goes through. First and foremost, we want to help people that are struggling to have a good, solid, healthy meal. ... It's their place first," Langner said.

Challenging stereotypes

Encouraging people of means to eat at One City Café and interact with food-insecure patrons is a secondary goal, but an important one.

College students in the "Serve. Earn. Learn." program attest to the power of relationships to challenge stereotypes and overcome barriers. The program, which recently completed its first-ever eight-week session, pays students a stipend of up to

$500 to serve at One City Café each Tuesday, read or watch assigned materials, write short reflection papers and engage in a group discussion after the meal.



The Feb. 26 dinner menu at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café (NCR photo/Maria Benevento)

Yareli Castor, a participant who is a freshman at Donnelly College in Kansas City, Kansas, told NCR during her shift Feb. 26 that the program has already been "life-changing" in at least one way: She plans to keep volunteering at the café after the program ends.

Castor admitted that she and other members of the program were nervous about conversing with guests during their first week. But guests they talked to "really changed us," she said. "As soon as we learned their name, as soon as we learned where they were from and why they had decided to come, it made it much more real to us."

Rockhurst University junior Jack Oxley said he's learned some surprising things. For one, he assumed people who ate at soup kitchens were all homeless, but he has learned that although many may have precarious, temporary or crowded living situations, few sleep on the streets.

Tom Turner, the director of Bishop Sullivan Center who developed and leads Serve. Earn. Learn., saw students reach their comfort zone by the second or third week. He hopes to hold the program four times each year with new groups of students and eventually develop a version for adult volunteers.

The program helps issues that students read about become more than theoretical, Turner said. One week, the reading featured a doctor who struggled to understand why low-income patients didn't use available resources to take better care of themselves. Prior to their discussion, they witnessed a homeless man refuse to go to a shelter on a frigid night. "The conversation was much less abstract" than if the students had been confined to a classroom, Turner said.

"There can be a stigma sometimes from people I go to college with, people that come from a place of privilege ... that we don't have much in common with people that may sleep on the street or may struggle day to day," said Oxley, but he's learned to be present with people from different backgrounds.

"You can't really change the huge problems of racial or socioeconomic inequality, but we can take the time to really learn and listen and most importantly just recognize people's dignity," he said.

Castor's favorite experience happened on a Wednesday when she wasn't required to attend, but heard extra help was needed.

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After she brought a woman a napkin, "something kind of told me to just sit down and talk to her, because she was by herself," Castor said. "As soon as I said, 'What's your name?', she said her name and then kind of openly started telling me her life story."

Castor had wondered if the woman would ask for money or some other concrete assistance. The story was "really sad" and she was crying.

"But in the end, she didn't ask me for anything, she was just like, 'Thank you for listening,' " Castor said. "That was the best night."

'Bringing the inner foodie out'

Castor didn't see the kitchen before its transformation. But she did start her program when the changes were still new to patrons.

"We saw the facial expressions of people coming in. They were like, 'Wow.' ... We even heard some people say, 'This is the first time I've ever been in a restaurant,' " Castor said.

Langner has heard rave reviews of both the food and the atmosphere, including one self-described homeless person who said, "When I'm here, I smile a lot more than I do all day."

"The folks that come in, they know good food, they know when it's delicious, they know when it's not. They know what they like. They know what good presentation is. ... It's bringing the inner foodie out in everybody," Langner said.

The reactions to his food are Tiller's favorite part of his job. He enjoys walking through the dining room to check on and converse with guests and particularly remembers a night when he "heard the loudest laugh" and passed a group of people drinking coffee and socializing.

Chef Dwight Tiller cuts enchilada casserole during dinner at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City

Chef Dwight Tiller cuts enchilada casserole during dinner at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café in Kansas City, Missouri, Feb. 26. He is assisted by volunteer Karen Stigers. (NCR photo/Maria Benevento)

"You could tell that whatever their worries are outside of the doors, [those worries] were outside of the doors ... they came in here, they were warm, they were fed and they felt great," he said.

"When they're here, and they're enjoying themselves, at least for this hour and a half ... they can leave everything at the door."

But the job has come with some unexpected challenges as well. One day, Tiller decided to prepare fresh green beans for the night's vegetable — an essential component of any meal at the café. He blanched them just enough that "they still had a little snap to them. That's how I like it. That's how I was taught."

So Tiller was shocked when he saw plates after plate of uneaten green beans being scraped into the trash. He realized that many guests had dental issues that prevented them from eating the firm beans. Ever since, he's cooked vegetables longer and slow-cooked meat until it's tender enough for all guests to chew.

Managing and training a new crew of volunteers every night — almost all from Catholic parishes that take responsibility for one night per month — is also a new challenge.

"But I guess that's the beautiful thing, too, because who comes and works for free and helps you run your facility?" Tiller said.

The changes to the kitchen have been an adjustment for volunteers as well, but mostly a positive one.

"A lot of our volunteer roles left from that barrier of being behind the serving line to ... right out with the customers that we serve," Langner said. "There was some trepidation with them and nervousness, but I think when people have experienced it: game-changer. Almost all positive."



The dining room at Bishop Sullivan Center's One City Café is pictured Feb. 26 shortly before diners arrive for the evening meal. (NCR photo/Maria Benevento)

Karen Stigers, a volunteer who has coordinated the St. Francis Xavier Parish serving group for decades, said the new setup was "more welcoming and more dignified, if you will, than what we had." She was wowed by the changes to the space and has the impression that the guests feel more comfortable.

Not all of the changes are popular with everyone; one man, liberally sprinkling pepper onto his cooked mixed greens — the side dish served alongside a choice of chicken or beef enchilada casserole, with salad, cookies and a beverage (tea, coffee or water) also available — complained about the lack of salt shakers.

(Turner confirmed that the omission was intentional — just one more effort to improve health.)

But in general, guests who spoke to NCR had only positive comments about the meal.

"It's a nice place to eat. It's nicer than it's ever been," said one man who didn't give his name.

"It's great. They serve good food. They're courteous. And it's clean," said Timothy Miles, a homeless veteran from New Jersey who arrived in Kansas City about a week earlier and had come to One City Café every day since. "I love it. It kind of separates you from the outside."

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This story appears in the **The Field Hospital** feature series. View the full series.
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