

Giving thanks with the Sandwich Mission

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They came to the back roads of West Augustine from both sides of the tracks, blacks and whites, old folks and children. Some were dressed in holiday finery, others in worn out work clothes. And when they gathered in a circle, holding hands, they united in their purpose for being there to give thanks to God for his love and for the unity they have experienced.

The occasion was the Sandwich Mission's pre-Thanksgiving lunch held at noon on the day before Thanksgiving in a vacant lot off Nassau and Cathedral Streets. It is an area of unpaved roads, old run down houses where a discarded bathtub sits in one yard, chairs and makeshift tables near the road where a game of cards frequently takes place, and where a majority of the residents are unemployed.

But on this day, filled with sunshine and laughter, instead of eating the usual offering of free sandwiches provided by the mission, more than two hundred guests dined on deep fried turkey and plenty of holiday trimmings. Much of the food was provided by members of the Good News Presbyterian Church with which the Sandwich Mission is affiliated. Publix and Winn Dixie contributed the turkeys.

The aroma of the cooking turkeys filled the neighborhood as residents hustled out their doors toward the makeshift outdoor caf. Good News church members arrived earlier that morning to set up and decorate tables for the food and tables and chairs for the guests.

Mitch Heinz, founder of the Sandwich Mission, couldn't have been happier with the turnout. He and his group of volunteers have been visiting the area on Wednesdays and Thursdays for more than a year, bringing brown bags, each filled with a sandwich, drink, crackers, dessert, and the most important ingredient for their visitcards with a scripture inscribed.

West Augustine residents looked upon Heinz with skepticism when he first began distributing the sandwiches along with the Word of God. Although it was 33 year old Heinz who initiated the project last year by handing out a couple dozen sandwiches, the project caught on quickly with church members.

Heinz estimates that more than 10,000 lunches have been served so far this year. "It's all pretty amazing when you figure that it started out as me and my son making 30 lunches a week," Heinz commented.

As his weekly presence in the mostly all-black neighborhood was eventually accepted, thanks in part to the support of West Augustine residents Glenda and Delores Richardson, the mission grew. With the help of Tara Guemon

and others from the Good News Church, sandwich makers were recruited and financial support started coming from individuals and organizations.

Flagler College students also play a big part in the outreach program on a weekly basis. Several arrived to help serve the food, including Lindy King, Christina McEldrew and Keiko Chibana. Heinz relies on the Flagler group, saying, "They are the backbone of the Wednesday outreach and they do a lot of behind the scenes work."

Heinz figures he now has an average of 200 volunteers a month helping with the mission, but, he said, "We'd like to get the word out to more in the community, either as volunteers or as contributors, to help expand our work."

Although it's the sandwiches that draw the weekly crowds with not everyone interested in the religion aspect, the scripture cards in the brown bags drew enough interest that an outdoor Bible study time now takes place on Thursdays.

As West Augustine resident Jerome Richardson was assisting with the turkey cooking, he looked around at the assembling crowd and remarked, "My, oh, my. This is wonderful. In all my 46 years of living in West Augustine we now have people from both sides of the tracks coming together here. They've always stayed on their side, and we stayed on our side," he explained. "Now, thanks to the love of God, people of all colors have come together in love and unity. The Lord has really blessed us," Richardson commented.

Heinz had another reason to be happy. After Carolyn Fisher entertained the diners by singing "We Gather Together," and other seasonal songs, she beckoned Heinz and his wife, Jenn, to her side and sang "The Wind Beneath My Wings," in honor the couple's 9th wedding anniversary. A smiling Mitch looking at Jenn, and so all could hear, said, "I thank my wife for allowing me to be here to celebrate this day."

- *The Sandwich Mission will host a Christmas luncheon on Dec. 12 at noon at the same location. Anyone who would like to help or participate in the event may contact Heidi@sandwichmission.org or call Mitch Heinz at 315-2725. Contributions of food and/or grocery store gift cards would be appreciated.*

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