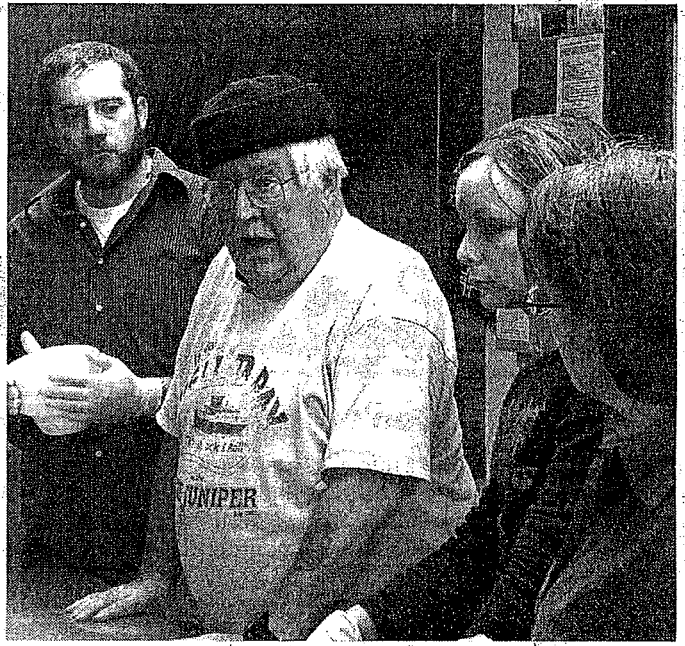


A Bright Spot in the "Season of Cheer"

By Caroline Kehne

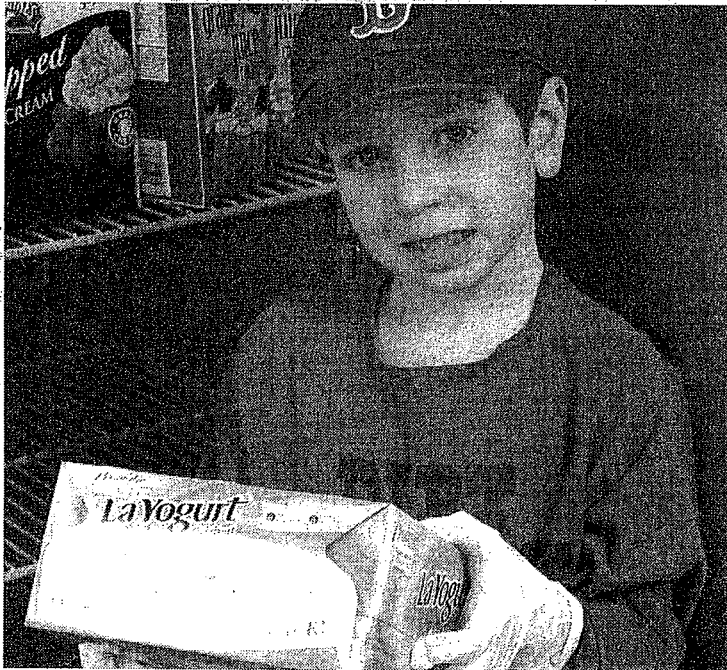
For some people, there's not much to cheer about in this prolonged economic downturn. Job loss, illness, advanced age and loneliness are tough enough to deal with without seeing the holiday blitz around them. Sometimes, respite comes in the form of a hot meal served by friendly people who are there to listen and to share. That's what happens every Wednesday night at the Trinity Church basement. Around 4:30 p.m., visitors begin to arrive for a weekly meal prepared by community volunteers. Tonight, a nippy December night, nobody tarries long outside; they quickly move inside find a place at one of the long tables, waiting patiently for the serving line to open.

The Trinity Church suppers are now a regular institution, made possible by the modern kitchen installed by the Rev. John Sorenson, Trinity's former Rector. Meal coordinator Frank Pabst, former captain of the Juniper and one of the community's most colorful characters, oversees the program. Every Wednesday, a select crew of volunteers arrives in early afternoon to begin preparations for the evening meal, which is served from 5:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. This night, by a quarter to five, about two-dozen people have come in for the cold for the spaghetti supper featuring Frank's



Above: Meal coordinator Frank Pabst (center) gives some last minute advice to volunteers.

Left: Volunteerism comes in all ages. Luke Moser came to help with his dad James. Photos: Caroline Kehne.



special spaghetti sauce.

This week's helpers are led by Scott Bombard, sales manager at Graymont Materials Group of Plattsburgh. His motley crew is composed primarily of fellow Graymont employees and family members. Including Bombard's own daughter, Lindsey, a teacher at AuSable Valley Central School. "I learned about the community meal from Wayne Duprey [Executive Director] of College Auxiliary Services and decided to give it a go," explains Scott Bombard. "It gives us an opportunity to do something in the community and also, to get together for something other than work." Graymont volunteers have been active in many community fundraisers, including the annual Dozer Days and the American Heart Association's Heart Walk.

On that blustery December night, about a dozen Graymont volunteers and family members don plastic gloves and hairnets, and quickly get down to the business of preparing a meal for up to 70 guests. One team is on salad detail, preparing large bowls of greens and vegetables, while across the table members of the dessert brigade cut cakes and pies. Others tend the massive restaurant-grade vat in which pounds of pasta boil away. Outside in the dining area, volunteers ready the serving line.

At a few minutes before five, Pabst gives some last minute instructions before opening the lines. If there is a big crowd (and, he says, crowds had been averaging

about 70 per night), servers have to stretch the serving portion size to accommodate everybody. A small crowd means that some can come back for seconds. In this economy, it's hard to tell just how it will go.

Within a few minutes it's clear that tonight's clientele will be a moderate crowd, a little over 50. "The number has been going down," says Pabst, surveying the crowd. Rev. Colin Belton, Rector of Trinity, is also there for the meal and they quietly discuss the turnout.

"Trinity [community meal attendance] is running behind last year," says. Is this a sign that the local economy is slowly reviving, or are the needy finding other ways of getting by? Pabst shrugs. Trinity volunteers are there to serve anybody who comes, regardless.

Despite the weather, the mood inside is good. Diners greet one another like old friends. The group is mixed, mostly elderly, but there are younger individuals and a few families with children. Everyone has a reason for being there: some are unable to work because of a disability; some have lost jobs; others just need a night out.

One group arrives together, every week. It's easy to take for granted that everybody has access to transportation, but within a few minutes, it becomes clear that just getting to services such as the community meal can be a challenge for someone without a car. One of the group confides that she was shy about coming down to the community meal, but she and her husband now come regularly. "I come for the company," she says.

By six o'clock, the crowd is beginning to thin out. Back in the kitchen, the Graymont team is washing dishes. This week, there are lots of leftover desserts, so many go home with extras. There is a nice feeling, overall, as volunteers clean and sweep before closing up for the night. Another night, another meal.

The Trinity Church Community Meal is served Wednesdays 5:00 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. in the church basement, located at 17 Trinity Place, Plattsburgh. From January to mid-April the meal will be served on Saturdays. If you, your community group, or business would like to take part by being part of a volunteer team, contact Capt. Frank Pabst at (518) 561-5771.