

New Haven

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Soup's on for city's hungry; kitchen offers free lunches Private donations support project

By Patricia Behre

There is a free lunch, and you can get it five days a week at New Haven's Community Soup Kitchen.

While cold, gray rain falls outside, nearly 90 people line formica tables and enjoy steaming bowls of home-made soup in the brightly lit dining room. Boisterous talk fills the room as baskets of bread are passed around to complete the free meal.

Some of the diners sit quietly at their places, eyes fixed on the spotless tables. Most, however, talk loudly with their friends as aproned staff people mill around, filling the coffee pots or bringing bagels in from the kitchen. Many of the patrons leave their places to refill their bowls or bring hot cups of coffee to their friends.

"I heard about this place from a friend of mine," says one middle aged man. "It's a good idea, and now I come here about two or three times a week." He comes to the Soup Kitchen because "the cost of food is just so bad."

"I'm unemployed," admits another patron. Today the Soup Kitchen provides the only meal he will eat. "This is it," he says, gesturing to the bowl in front of him.

Most of the diners at the Kitchen receive welfare money, but it often isn't enough to cover food costs, an unmarried diner says. "I've managed to get by on welfare, but for a person with children, it's impossible."

"Virtually all of the people who come here are on welfare," Judy

Hopkins, director of the Soup Kitchen said yesterday. "They are given \$14 a week for food. For 21 meals, \$14 doesn't go very far."

"We get more people from the 15th of the month to the end—almost 90 to 100 people a day—because their checks run out," Hopkins adds.

Hopkins has been director since June, although the Kitchen has been operating for two years. It was created by four women, wives of Divinity School students, and is housed at 84 Broadway, in the Episcopal Church.

Originally the Kitchen was only open one day a week. It is funded entirely from private contributions and receives no money from the city. "We really don't want to apply to the city for money because we want this to be

a community organization," Hopkins explains. "We don't want it to be politically funded."

One of the projects responsible for supporting the Soup Kitchen is the "Walk Against Hunger," a pledge walk which raised almost \$4000 last spring. Other Church groups and private individuals donate money for food, too, Hopkins said.

But there are some things money can't buy. "I come here for the food, but also for the company," says one young patron as he finishes the last bite of his vegetable soup. "This place eases the loneliness for me."

"I'm a steady," one older man remarks, explaining that he eats at the Soup Kitchen five days a week. "I'm a senior citizen so I could go to one of the senior



YON-Matt Taylor

SOMEONE'S IN THE KITCHEN—Volunteers prepare soup at New Haven's Community Soup Kitchen.

"when I walk in here I don't feel humiliated." "The meals are home made and nourishing, and the place is clean," he adds; "besides, I like the younger crowd here. When I leave this place, I feel good."

The staff at the Kitchen, except for two administrators, are all volunteers. "The volunteers make things cheerful," one man says; another nods, adding,

Hopkins, a former home economics teacher in North Haven, smiles at the compliments from her patrons. She is a young woman who speaks quickly, excusing herself to help one diner to more bread, or direct another to a clean table. She is most gratified, she says, when someone finds a job that she has referred them to.

"It would be impossible to change the lives of the people who come here," she says, "but what we can do is make this part of their day good by serving a meal and giving people a friendly atmosphere and a listening ear if they want it," she adds.

"Even people who don't get along on the streets come in here and are congenial," she says.

"Yea," agrees one man, "once in a while someone comes in drunk or something but the volunteers try to comfort him. I wish all places were set up to be as cheerful," he says. "Nice places are hard to get, I guess."



OPEN TO EVERYONE—Three diners enjoy a free lunch at the Soup Kitchen which opens its doors from 12-2, every day except Sunday and Wednesday.

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