

Potrero Avenue â??collectiveâ?? soup kitchen is the hostess with the mostest: Everythingâ??s free, no government paperwork or religion attached

Description

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Itâ??s lunchtime at Martin de Porres House of Hospitality, and the Potrero Avenue soup kitchen is abuzz with activity. A few dozen people are sitting down to a meal of macaroni salad, vegetable soup, and tea. Others are lined up for a shower. A volunteer is distributing socks and other clothes, and a few guests are being treated to foot and leg massages.



Volunteer Mim Locke in the courtyard of the Martin de Porres House of Hospitality. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Everything at Martinâ??s is free. There are no eligibility checks, no proselytizing. There are no paid bosses, no salaries, and jobs are loosely defined. â??Weâ??re run as a collective; itâ??s a get-it-done model,â?• said Mim Locke, 76, who has been volunteering at Martinâ??s for some 36 years.

Although itâ??s named after Martin de Porres, a Peruvian Catholic saint who lived in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the 53-year-old soup kitchen is non-denominational. â??We are a community of people with diverse spiritual practices, although our roots are in and we continue to be inspired by the Catholic Worker Movement,â?• the groupâ??s website states.

Service is the mantra youâ??ll hear when meeting volunteers here. â??Service for me is a joy. You see miracles here every day,â?• said Abby Lehrman, a longtime volunteer and former member of the groupâ??s board of directors.

Martinâ??s takes no money from government agencies or religious institutions. Funding comes from individual donations, though it has received grants from businesses and foundations, including Levi Strauss and the Goldman Foundation. â??Taking money from the government requires a good deal of paperwork, and we donâ??t have the staff for that. Besides, we donâ??t want to be beholden,â?• said Lehrman, a retired social worker.

Vast amounts of food

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Volunteers prepare lunchtime meals six days a week. Breakfast services, which stopped during the pandemic, might resume later this year. On a typical day, 100 to 200 people stop in for a midday meal. Feeding that many people requires vast amounts of food. Soup is prepared in a 20-gallon caldron. â??Some days we need 30 gallons,â?• Locke said.



Between 100 to 200 people stop in at the soup kitchen each day for lunch. It moved to its Potrero Avenue location, a former auto repair shop, in 1985, with an extensive remodel that included an open-plan kitchen, below, large enough for a crew of 10 or so volunteers to work comfortably. (Photos courtesy of Martin de Porres.)



Preparing the always-vegetarian meals consumes hours of labor every morning â?? and while Martinâ??s strives to be thrifty, the food budget is roughly $120,000 a year. Some of that is offset by donations from local businesses. The Rainbow Grocery, for one, donates bread, and Last Gasp Press put on a fundraiser a few years back and raised $9,200.

When Martinâ??s was founded in 1970, it operated out of a former bar on 22nd Street in the Mission District. There wasnâ??t much space, and there was only room for about 49 people at a time. Crowds waiting for a meal tended to spill out onto the street. That annoyed nearby residents so much that the barâ??s owner wouldnâ??t renew the lease.

Needing a new home, Martinâ??s began a fundraising campaign. The Chronicleâ??s Herb Caen boosted the effort in his widely read column. Individuals and businesses pitched in. Barbara Collier, a visual artist known as â??the spiritual backboneâ?• of the soup kitchen, said she was so sure they would raise the balance of the down payment by the due date she claimed sheâ??d jump off the Golden Gate Bridge if they didnâ??t. She did not have to leap.

Housing for volunteers

Martinâ??s purchased a former auto repair shop on Potrero Avenue near 16th Street and did an extensive remodel in 1985. The space is large and airy and inviting, with little institutional feel. The dining room walls are exposed brick. The room has skylights and abuts an open courtyard with plentiful seating. The open-plan kitchen is large enough for a crew of 10 or so volunteers to work comfortably.

Martinâ??s also owns a three-flat house in the Mission, a place for full-time volunteers to live, along with an apartment above the soup kitchen.

Although Martinâ??s tends to keep a low profile, it has attracted the occasional celebrity visitor. Mother Teresa stopped by and blessed the new showers in the â??80s. The Dalai Lama visited and rock entrepreneur Bill Graham helped prepare a meal.

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Like a lot of soup kitchens, Martinâ??s finds that the holidays attract hordes of volunteers eager to help â?? once. Martinâ??s got so many one-off requests to help out during Thanksgiving a few years ago, that only people who volunteer regularly are eligible to help with the groupâ??s special holiday meals.

Unlike the holiday helpers, many guests â?? as people who come for a meal are known â?? often return to volunteer.

Community connection

Jake Pearson, 60**,** was homeless for 23 years and often came to Martinâ??s for food and showers. Now heâ??s got a place in Bernal Heights, but he frequently drops by to help out, and once a week he offers free haircuts. â??I want to stay connected,â?• said Pearson, who was making sure people in line for showers had everything they needed.

Aaron Clark, 61, is a former Navy quartermaster who hit a rough patch and relied on Martinâ??s for food and other services for years. Heâ??s working at a video company these days, but heâ??s a regular volunteer at the soup kitchen. He jokingly calls himself â??the toilet whispererâ?• because heâ??s the in-house plumber. â??I fixed something once and they had me stick around.

â??Volunteering gives me a purpose. Seeing people on the street bothers me,â?• Clark said as he gave out bagels and cups of tea shortly before lunch was ready.



Abby Lehrman, a longtime volunteer, says service is their mantra. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Although Martinâ??s isnâ??t tightly structured, it does have a core group that meets weekly, and every meal shift has a crew chief. Lehrman, the former social worker, and Locke are part of that group.

Lehrman moved to San Francisco in 1972, when her first husband, a journalist, started a teaching job at San Francisco State College. Despite her long tenure in the Bay Area, her speech has the cadence and accent of a native New Yorker. She worked at a series of social welfare-related jobs and began volunteering at Martinâ??s in 1984. She laughs as she recalls what Martinâ??s was like in those days. â??We were a ragtag bunch. Patchouli and perfume.â?•

Pandemic recovery



Soup at the kitchen is prepared in a 20-gallon caldron. â??Some days we need 30 gallons,â?• said volunteer Mim Locke. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Locke, a native of Concord, Massachusetts, was never interested in conventional employment. â??People here donâ??t want regular jobs; I never wanted a boss,â?• she said. Gardening is a passion: â??Itâ??s my other hat.â?• But her commitment to Martinâ??s is the literally center of her life: She lives in the groupâ??s apartment over the soup kitchen.

The pandemic forced Martinâ??s to rethink how it serves the community, she said. Instead of sit-down meals, â??we gave out more than 250 bag lunches a day.â?• Attendance even after the end of the pandemic was down, but itâ??s recovering. Martinâ??s she said, â??is experiencing a rebirth.â?•

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