

DESIREE COOPER: A metro man's lesson about the gift of giving

BY DESIREE COOPER
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"There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

-- Mahatma Gandhi

Brother Vincent Reyes has belonged to the Capuchin order for 46 years, some of that time as a hospital chaplain in Chicago.

But when he came back to Detroit in 1998, he noticed something amazing.

"I have never in my life seen such generous people as in Detroit," said Reyes, the former pastoral director of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit. "We have nearly 3,000 people on our volunteer list. That's incredible."

One of those people is Joe Vicari, a Clinton Township resident who owns the Andiamo Group, a cluster of 10 metro Italian restaurants.

For years, Vicari, 49, has raised funds for the soup kitchen, but this year, he's doing more than donating dough -- he's serving it, too.

"It's a great thing to give of your money," Reyes said. "But it's quite another thing when you break bread with someone. You have to look them in the eye."

That's exactly what Vicari hopes will happen when he brings his staff to cook at the 4390 Conner St. location Wednesday.

"Ninety percent of my chefs have never been to a soup kitchen," said Vicari, who also owns eight area family-style restaurants.

"We could have prepared the food at Andiamo and driven it there, but I wanted them to have a life-altering experience," he said.

Vicari has hit upon the karmic beauty of giving -- it transforms the giver as well as the receiver.

By cooking at the soup kitchen and serving its guests, the Andiamo staff is likely to get a firsthand taste of the sheer size of the hunger problem in southeast Michigan -- and share the humanity of those in need.

Take the challenge

If you're a restaurateur interested in meeting the challenge to prepare a meal for the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, call Brother Jerry Smith at 313-579-2100, extension 220.

"We serve 2,200 meals every day," said Brother Jerry Smith, executive director. "We have two kitchens, plus an emergency food pantry that serves 150 families per day."

The Capuchins don't just fill bellies, but they also provide substance abuse and literacy programs.

Despite the help, many of the soup kitchen's guests are chronically poor people with addictions, mental illness or other health problems. But many others work daily.

"Today I was sitting at a table with a family with five children -- the oldest were a set of 6-year-old twins," Smith said. "They had manners and didn't waste food. The father was working at a lawn service and wants to buy a house. They've come in frequently when they needed a little extra at the end of the month. Until people come down and actually have contact, they won't realize that our guests are just like them."

Vicari is challenging other area restaurants to do just that.

"I've always believed that you treat people the way you want to be treated," he said. "If you do, you'll get it back in spades."

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