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Soup kitchen director brings 'front-line' care

Patti Theros

[write the author](#)

08/10/2006 - Brother Jerry Smith's career has taken him from Minnesota to Central America to Florida to Milwaukee. And now, he is in Detroit, where he has been named the executive director of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. His degrees in social work and Spanish have proven very beneficial in his mission.

Born in Minnesota, Brother Jerry worked three years in Costa Rica for the Peace Corps after graduating from St. John's University. In 1974, he became part of the East Coast Migrant Health Project, which assisted migrant farm workers in getting health care.

After a year, Brother Jerry began working with the newly developed Migrant Head Start program initiated through a federal grant.

"It was a great experience working with the families. I remember walking through the cucumber fields of Delaware, recruiting Hispanic children as the first participants in the program in that state. My degree in Spanish was very helpful. The philosophy of the Head Start program has always stressed parent involvement, so from the beginning we tried to work with entire families. This has contributed greatly to the success of the program."



Brother Jerry Smith and Capuchin Soup Kitchen guests. Photos courtesy Patti Theros

Brother Jerry then became a Capuchin Franciscan friar. The friars (brothers) are a Roman Catholic religious order of men who commonly serve the needy through ministries, parishes and soup kitchens.

"Even after I joined the Capuchins, I continued to be a part of Migrant Head Start. For 20 years afterwards, I returned to the thrice-yearly, three-day meetings of the Parent Policy Council, serving as their interpreter."

Brother Jerry later moved to Milwaukee where he served six years at an inner city parish. Later, he served nine years as the chaplain at the Milwaukee County Jail, and then as a case manager for five years at Wisconsin Community Services, a non-profit agency serving the chronically mentally ill.

All of this "hands-on" work experience has proved beneficial as he now embarks on his new career at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen.

Brother Jerry said, fundraisers such as the Capuchin Souper Summer Celebration help fund the day-to-day operations of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. This year in June, the fundraiser raised more than \$145,000, a small portion of the more than \$7 million it costs to run the kitchen and related programs.

"Less than 1 percent of our money comes from the government," Brother Jerry said.

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Today, the kitchen has about 65 employees at four sites. Volunteers provide the equivalent services of an additional 20 full-time staffers, he said.

Brother Jerry Smith with Youth Farm Stand Coordinator, Dejuane Johnson, right, and Joseph Smith on left. Johnson participates in a program in which Earth Works Garden partners with the Wise Coalition of the Iroquois Avenue Christ Lutheran Church to operate the youth farm stands. Smith participated in the Growing Healthy Kids program for many years and now is in the youth farm stand program.

The soup kitchen got its official start in 1929 when Detroit's poor knocked on the monastery's back door asking for bread.

In response to the overwhelming social needs, the friars joined forces with the Secular Franciscans. They joined forces to collect food from farms, make soup, bake bread and serve meals in the hall next to the monastery. From these beginnings, the Capuchin Soup Kitchen was born.

The Capuchin Soup Kitchen today provides 2,500 hot meals per day at two locations; 300,000 pounds of food are distributed per month to families; 50,000 articles of clothing are given to clients per month; about 15 pieces of furniture or appliances are given to three to five families per day.

"It's a fabulous garden and helps educate children and their parents about good nutrition," Brother Jerry says.

"Every week during the growing season we utilize mini farm markets to distribute these vegetables to WIC (Women/Infants/Children) Program participants, and we provide our meal program guests with sizable quantities as well," he adds.

"We bring it all together at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. Our volunteers and community make it happen because they believe in us. My job as administrator is to make everyone else's job easier...to remove the barriers and facilitate the work of our wonderful employees," Brother Jerry says.

For more information and for volunteer opportunities, visit their Web site at www.cskdetroit.org or e-mail volunteer@cskdetroit.org or call (313) 579-2100, ext. 215.

The next scheduled fundraiser is the J.W. Smith Oldtimers Golf Outing from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 17, at the Sunnybrook Golf and Bowl. For information contact Walter Ziemniak (248) 544.1120 or Richard Sosin (248) 471-2389.

[Patti Theros is a freelance writer living in Grosse Pointe Farms](#)



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