

Good food, good company, good spirit as Ottawa Mission opens its doors for Easter meal

By John Stoesser, OTTAWA CITIZEN April 1, 2013



**Cheryl Campbell prays prior to enjoying a special roast beef dinner served on Easter Monday at the The Ottawa Mission Dining Room at 35 Waller Street.
Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger , Ottawa Citizen**

OTTAWA — Volunteers served up an Easter dinner of roast beef at the Ottawa Mission on Monday afternoon to anyone in need of a good meal. Every day for the past week, about 20 helpers channelled the spirit of giving and prepared gallons of gravy, baked thousands of potatoes, sliced up hundreds of pies and cooked more than 1,000 kilograms of roast beef.

Over a six-hour period, 2,352 meals were served during the annual feast.

Mary Hall's favourite part wasn't just the roast beef, but also the conversation.

"It's great that (the volunteers) really put a lot of effort into the meal," she said. "But I don't come just for the food, but for the camaraderie too. It's no fun eating alone and amazing what sharing a meal with people can do for your spirits."

The mission's food services manager of 11 years, Ric Watson, says he could be working in a restaurant or a hotel, but his current duties are more fulfilling.

"It's a cause close to my heart," Watson said. "You spend a day here helping people and you don't want to leave. I've been in bad situations before and people were always there to help me. This is my way of giving back."

Three hours into the meal and the volunteers had already provided more than a thousand plates of food. Throughout this hectic atmosphere, no one seemed stressed or agitated and the amount of laughter far outnumbered any frowns.

Watson said the best part was seeing families and children smile as they enjoyed a good holiday meal they might not otherwise have had.

In existence since 1906, the Ottawa Mission shelters an average of 255 men a night and also provides meals, job training and addiction treatment for those in need. The mission relied on donations to provide the Easter meal.

Rita McCartney, a volunteer of five years, was plating food in the bustling kitchen. After moving to Canada from Belfast in 1974, McCartney, a retired financial planner, said she's always volunteered because "it's an amazing feeling being able to help."

"Hard luck, like losing a job, could happen to anyone," she said. "I think you get a sense of how homelessness actually affects people when you work at a place like this."

McCartney said she could just as easily be on the other side of the counter.

After admitting to finishing his third dessert, Joseph Taaffe said he lives on about \$700 a month and feels lucky because "some people don't even have that."

"The staff are very friendly, very respectful and make it very comfortable to come here," he said.

Market researcher and volunteer Melanie Clement added to the ambience with some live entertainment. A one-woman act, she put her singing talents to use with tunes like John Lennon's Imagine.

Special servers from Ottawa City Hall, the Ottawa Police Service and former a NHLer, Jim Kyte, also lent a hand.

jstoesser@ottawacitizen.com">jstoesser@ottawacitizen.com