

Food Banks

G.T. 12.16.04



12-12-10

SERVING Hope

They are hungry, homeless, or just plain down on their luck.
They come to Pajaro Valley-based Loaves and Fishes.
And that's when the miracles begin.

*** Words and photos by Bruce Willey ***

✓ **D**ue west of downtown Watsonville is a multitude of warehouses where food grown locally in the "Salad Bowl" of America is gathered, packaged and shipped to points around the United States and beyond. Rows of semi-trucks back into these football field-sized warehouses, and, from afar, they look like a large litter of piglets suckling on their mama.

Down Second Street, in the midst of all this global gastronomic commerce, is a food distribution center with smaller dimensions. In fact it's a yellow, 100-year-old, two-bedroom house where the Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes makes its home.

Monday through Friday the hungry arrive at noon for a hot lunch or, throughout the morning, come to pick up grocery bags filled with food. The hungry are homeless, addicted, out of work, abused, sick, mentally afflicted, poor, farm workers, Anglos, Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, factory workers, children, teenagers, the elderly—you name it. They're all hungry.

Loaves and Fishes co-director Cecilia Garcia says they can't moralize about people's situations. "It would be demoralizing for us," she says.

They come in cafeteria-style lines, 50-100 of them each day, to eat. In a year Loaves and Fishes serves more than 15,000 hot meals and provides grocery bags full of food to 12,000 people.

Now, before I tell you that according to CNN, "Twelve Million Families Don't Have Enough to Eat in America," let's just say the annual do-gooder and seasonal altruism stories make me yawn. Especially set amongst the rattling bells of Christmas consumerism.

But the Loaves and Fishes story is truly different. They don't need volunteers and they don't necessarily want your leftover can of yams. They do welcome donations, however, and for the price of one lunch can feed five people. In other words, a dollar goes a very long way. "The hardest thing for us is money," says Loaves and Fishes director Phil Fisher. "There are people that want to bring a turkey or a canned good, and I always say fine, recognizing that giving something tangible really works for some people. But the bottom line for us is, a dollar bill is going to buy way more food than someone can bring us."

Loaves and Fishes also has everything and nothing to do with the tale in which Jesus feeds 5,000 people by sweeping his hand over three loaves and two fishes. They are still bound by the laws of physics, which states you can't get something from nothing, and as a result, the organization buys most of its food from the Second Harvest Food Bank—on the cheap.

Loaves and Fishes has no religious affiliation, but used to be called St. Patrick's Loaves and Fishes, which obviously does.

loaves and fishes



Head chef Maria Gonzalez (right) makes her famous potato enchiladas.

The pantry began in 1989 and came to prominence soon after the Loma Prieta Earthquake when it served more than 20,000 meals to earthquake victims. It went nonprofit and nonreligious in 1994, moving to the aging Victorian on Second Street four years ago, keeping up the pace ever since.

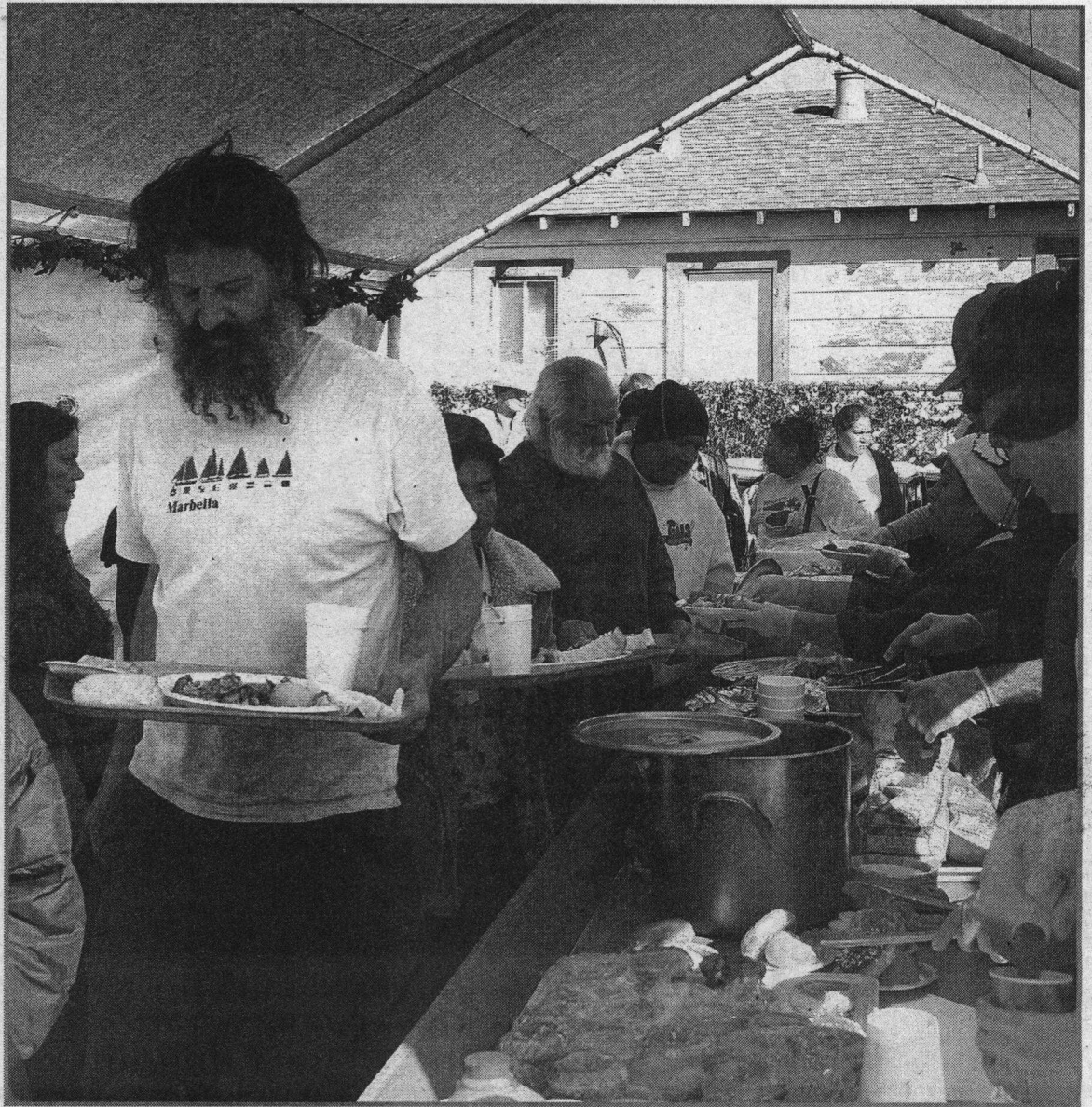
Yet, what Loaves and Fishes is able to do is accomplish miraculous things; and get as close to defying the laws of nature as possible by making a whole hell of a lot out of something small. From this house, Loaves and Fishes manages to serve 20 percent of the hotline referrals coming from the Second Harvest Food Bank in all of Santa Cruz County. (See Chart)

Lee Mercer, director of the Second Harvest Food Bank that serves Santa Cruz and Benito Counties, says Loaves and Fishes is vital for both the amount of food it distributes and the hours it keeps. Most of the church pantries throughout the county are only open twice a month, and it goes without saying that hunger doesn't keep a schedule. "They work harder and feed more people than almost any other pantry in our network," Mercer says. "For the small amount of funding they survive on and the dedication of the staff and volunteers, it is just incredible. They are serving the lion's share of the pantry food that goes out in this county."

In addition, Mercer says about one in four households in the county are below the threshold of poverty and are uncertain about where, and if, they will be able to feed themselves and their families. In other words, many families are living on the very edge of hunger, if not actually experiencing circumstances where they have to make a choice between keeping the electricity on, paying rent or putting food on the table.

“They are very friendly here and they never ask why I come. They treat me like a human being no matter what, which is good.”

—Brian Connaughton



Loaves and Fishes dishes out daily lunches.

The Cupboards Aren't Bare

When you first walk into Loaves and Fishes, you will most likely be greeted by Eiko Nishihara. She grew up in that huge old house by Highway 1 near the Chevron station—the one that people are trying to save as it sinks slowly into the surrounding farmland. Of course, she doesn't greet you that way, but that's sort of her local claim to fame. She's 78 years old, grew up in a farming family in Watsonville and was shipped to a Japanese internment camp in Arkansas during World War II. She speaks three languages—Japanese, English and Spanish—and is in charge of the pantry.

By her side is Maria Roblero, a 23-year-old volunteer that began as an intern and stayed. She grew up Watsonville and she's shy with pretty eyes. Or maybe it's just hard to make an impression when Juan Alfaro and Julian Maldonado are in the room. They're volunteers who are the muscle in the pantry, the go-to guys when the kitchen needs to be mopped.

Alfaro picked lettuce for 27 years and has four kids. He wears his wraparound shades inside the house, shaves his head, and if not for his easy demeanor you'd think he was a tough guy.

Maldonado, on the other hand is a natural born entertainer. In sidekick fashion to Juan's tough-guy persona, he puts a woman's hat on that features a hideously big bow that streams off the back like a tail of fluttering estrogen. At first I think he's joking, but he takes the comedy further, never taking the hat off and smiling mischievously with what are left of his teeth. He's been volunteering here for five years, *mas e menos*, more or less.

Alfaro and Maldonado are friends it turns out, and Alfaro translates from inside the pantry where the shelves of food are kept. Maldonado lives by the side of the Pajaro River. When the river rises, as it tends to do when it rains, his “house” goes downstream, along with all his clothes and meager possessions, like plastic bags that serve as his roof. On good days, he fishes the river and bathes in its current. Which is all to say, Maldonado may be homeless, but he's a proud river rat. When it pours, Juan lets him sleep in his car and brings him inside to feed him on those days. Between scraping together a life on the scrubby banks of the Pajaro, Maldonado works five days a week for free and a hot lunch.

There aren't any doors inside the Loaves and Fishes house, so outside the pantry and the check-in room is the administrative nerve center of Loaves and Fishes. It's also the former living room and is cozy and casual for an office. Here, you'll find Phil Fisher and Cecilia Garcia. They are director and co-director, respec-

tively, and do exactly that, plus scrounge for leftover bread and muffins from sympathetic businesses before they come to work. If there's a chain of command, it's invisible in this room with two Ansel Adams posters and the ubiquitous Monterey Bay landscape from space that every local organization seems compelled to hang on their wall.

But sometimes it's best to step up and look down to get the bigger picture. Which is exactly what Fisher and Garcia do; they are cartographers of hunger, if you will, and together they keep Loaves and Fishes oiled and whirling.

Fisher worked in education for most of his career and took this job in semi-retirement. Good, too, because his looks belie his age, as does his frequent use of “awesome.”

Garcia, on the other hand, is a pretty, no-nonsense sort of person who would be impossible to contradict. She's been working at Loaves and Fishes for the last year or so, and she does anything that needs to be done, including counseling some of the people who come to eat. Underlying it all is a love story. Fisher and Garcia met while volunteering at Loaves and Fishes, and are married now.

“There's enough food, but people can't afford it,” Fisher says. “They can't afford it because it costs so much to live here. They're paying almost as much here as Aptos. There's a two bedroom that rented for \$1,200 (a month) right here on Second Street with no parking or garage.”

It's an easy thing to sympathize with, especially after having skipped breakfast and knowing that I, too, am a paycheck away from qualifying to eat at Loaves and Fishes.

Hunger Pangs

Like thirst, the feeling of hunger is a familiar one to both the rich and the poor. Under normal circumstances, the human body can go about five hours tops before food becomes a preoccupation. And if hunger has an evil twin before it turns to absolute starvation it's the word “pang.”

Hunger, at least for me, feels like a relentless “panging” on the stomach walls by a brutish ball-peen hammer, but, apparently, the American Heritage Dictionary defines it as, “1. A sudden, sharp spasm of pain. 2. A sudden sharp feeling of distress or anguish.”

loaves and fishes



“For a lot of these people this is one of the few places they can come where they are treated like a real person, a human being for 45 minutes, or however long it takes to eat lunch.”

—Phil Fisher, director of Loaves and Fishes

Volunteers Julian Maldonado (left) and Juan Alfaro keep the food pantry flowing.

loaves and fishes

That clarified, imagine if you felt hunger pangs but were helpless to do anything about it. No Del Taco, no Cheerios, no organic spinach with chopped walnuts. See how easily pang 1 turns into pang 2? That's what I was thinking as the smells from the kitchen wafted into the Loaves and Fishes' office. It's enough to give one a panic attack.

Directly alleviating both kinds of pangs is Maria Gonzalez, the head chef, and her capable volunteers, Emerlinda Cancino, Bertha Romo and Gloria Veneer. Together, they must cook a meal in four hours for 70-plus people. Skilled restaurant chefs do not like this kind of thing, and having worked around a few, I've seen the pots fly over a dozen orders when they came in at once. Maria takes it in great stride, though. Today she is making potato cheese enchiladas, beans, rice, salad and a huge pot of steaming chicken. She flits around the kitchen in an organized rhythm as if the kitchen is an extension of herself.

Maria used to work on one of those catering trucks that serves farm and construction workers, and has been cooking professionally for 12 years. She has to work with what Loaves and Fishes can muster from Second Harvest Food Bank. When she's short of some onions or garlic, she uses her own money and buys them at the La Rosa Market down the street.

"Sometimes I get a little nervous that I don't have enough, but somehow I always have enough for everybody," she says, looking into the oven to see how the enchiladas are coming along and stirring the enormous chicken. Maria is a cheery, uncomplaining woman who meets each question with a confident answer that isn't boastful despite sounding so. "They like my food. I do this because I know people really like the food."

From the smell of things, she's right. It smells delicious. And not in the Don Quixote's famous quip, "There's no sauce in the world like hunger." No, it's good, gospel good, and for all sorts of reasons, the people are already lining up outside.

At noon sharp the food is moved in large trays outside to the dining area. It's basically the back yard, cement covered over the grass and large white tents covering the long tables. The food line is set up outside the back door and the volunteers don rubber gloves and hats and serve the hungry.

One of the first in line is John "Hotrod" Ropport who's taking the holidays seriously. "I wish you a merry Christmas from the bottom of our hearts," he sings as he holds out his tray for food. "You have beautiful teeth, you're gorgeous.

"Stay alive and die trying," he says to Bertha, who is serving the salad and doesn't understand a lick of what he's saying other than the occasional Spanish. "We're going to make it. *Gracias*, see. Put it on there. *Gracias*. What's up brother? Hallelujah, Yeah, *see, adios, gracias*. I wanna wish you a merry Christmas, we wanna wish you a merry Christmas—from the bottom of our hearts."

Others aren't quite as jovial. Some look like they have already done a hard day's work in the fields with the rich Pajaro Valley soil staining their knees. Others step sideways like slow-moving crabs down the line, nodding humbly their thanks. After being served they sit at the long tables, the small plastic forks no match for their appetites.

"I like to have one nice hot meal once a day," says Brian Connaughton. Brian used to be a karate instructor and a bouncer at The Catalyst. Now, he's got hypomania and has a hard time organizing his thoughts in a continuous way. "They are very friendly here and they never ask why I come. They treat me like a human being no matter what, which is good." Brian lives in a resident hotel in downtown

Watsonville. They don't allow hotplates in the rooms.

Meanwhile, "Hotrod" Ropport sits down to eat. He's homeless, diabetic and bi-polar and has lived in the area since 1989. "You see," he says. "We're in a relationship. It's called the human race."

With a plate of rice, salad and potato enchiladas, I sit by Linda and another man who speaks Spanish. I try talking with my tablemates out of politeness but it's a rather hopeless proposition. Linda says she's depressed and the man mutters, "*no comprendo*." Nevertheless, the food is excellent. Best lunch I've had in a long time, and I know my lunches. Not to get snooty food critic about it, but the salad is fresh, organic even, the enchiladas have a nice picante flavor that gives the potatoes something to think about, and the Spanish rice is moist and spicy. It all complements each other and I get up feeling fully nourished and ready for a nap.

Inside, Maria and her volunteers have already cleaned the kitchen and covered the leftovers. Because there's a tray of rice left, she'll make chicken Posole, a Mexican soup. Nothing goes to waste.

"The approach is one of mutual respect," says Fisher. "They respect the people that work here and the volunteers and people who work here respect them, too. For a lot of these people this is one of the few places they can come where they are treated like a real person, a human being for 45 minutes, or however long it takes to eat lunch."

For more information, to volunteer or to make a donation, call Loaves and Fishes at 722-4144 or 150 Second St., Watsonville, CA 95076.