

Homeless BioC

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# Soup kitchen workers: 'Saints became saints because of their compassion for the poor'

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PETER CAROTA USED TO DRIVE A Mercedes Benz and sell real estate and antiques. "I never knew there were poor people in Aptos, where I grew up," says the tall, bearded 34-year-old.

A trip to Brazil four years where he worked with a nun "and the poorest of the poor" changed all that.

Some people have so much, other so little. Seeing it spurred Carota to change his standard of living. He sold his car, and started riding the bus. He volunteered to become director of the Suicide Prevention Service. He cooked free meals at Holy Cross Hall in Santa Cruz.

"I became aware that there are a lot of hungry, poor, and mentally ill people in Santa Cruz," he says.

Today Carota and about a dozen volunteers run the St. Francis Catholic Soup Kitchen, one of the few places in town where the indigent and the down-and-out can get a free noontime meal — no questions asked, no sermons offered.

Carota's friends from four years ago "think I'm stupid," he laughs. "They all want to be millionaires.

"But I'm happy doing this. I feel a lot more peaceful."

Millionaires, indeed. The soup kitchen works extensively with the opposite end of the economic scale, the poor.

Poverty is not something you normally associate with Santa Cruz, our tree 'n sea paradise where everybody goes to have a good time. It hides in the alleys of the Beach Flats. It huddles in tiny one-room studio apartments where whole families live. It's written on the faces of alcoholics and the mentally ill, wandering the streets because there is no place for them to go. Hunger? It exists in the empty stomachs of unemployed men and women, once too proud to take charity, or in families living on the fringes of economic survival.

"I wish more people could be exposed to this kind of thing," Carota says, stirring a pot of soup inside the kitchen. "Even if they were to help with the senior citizens' meals at the Loudon Nelson, they'd learn a lot about poverty in America."

"We want them to be treated like any of us would be treated if we were to go out to eat at a restaurant," says Carota.

"To me, there's Christ in each one of those people, and I want to treat them as if Christ were to come into our kitchen."

Soup kitchen regulars are primarily men in their 20s and 30s. There are some men who have been recently laid off; single mothers with children, and occasional families. During the summer, young European travelers frequented the mission.

Some people there appear emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded. Some have that wizened, red-complected look of longtime alcoholics. Still others look like the kind of person you would cross the street to avoid.

Unlike many missions, the hungry do not have to listen to a sermon while they eat. A cabinet in the dining room is stacked with books on Christianity, but, says Carota, "we believe they'll experience God through our actions, our spirit of service."

"You don't need to say anything. From the very beginning, people said they could feel the presence of God here. We believe in giving unconditional love to anyone who walks in here."

Sounds nice, but finding a place to put the venture has been troublesome. Kitchen workers say they must constantly justify their work to people, to justify "giving food to bums."

"I just tell them, if Christ were here, he'd be doing it," offers volunteer Barbara Pini.

Even thornier is the question of where such a philanthropic venture should go. Everybody may agree with their ideals, but no one wants a soup kitchen in their neighborhood.

In January the kitchen approaches the end of its lease with the Seaside Co., which has already given Carota two time extensions.

Seaside Co. general manager Ed Hutton said there has been an increase in panhandling, petty theft and car vandalism since the kitchen opened. Neighbors have complained that they have had to roust sleeping transients from the lawns and carports. Additionally, the kitchen was originally set up to serve 50 meals a day, not 200. "It's just not a good situation," says Hutton.

Carota agrees that the building is too small

2,000 square foot building with a large kitchen, 20 parking spaces and a fire wall. It must be zoned for commercial use.

They are also looking for a plot of land on which they might build their own soup kitchen.

Says Carota, "Some people are really critical of us, and it really hurts me. My whole upbringing as a loving Christian is to help anyone who is down and out.

"All the saints became saints because of their compassion for the poor," Carota concludes.

"I have a hard time understanding why people mind giving a bowl of soup to a poor person."



Peter Carota mans the soup kettles



inside the kitchen. Even if they were to help with the senior citizens' meals at the Loudon Nelson, they'd learn a lot about poverty in America."

Since May the kitchen, 817 Beach St., has served hot soup, salad and bread to to all who show up weekdays between noon and 2 p.m.

For Thanksgiving they are planning a free feast from 1 to 3 p.m. at Holy Cross Hall. "There's nothing for the senior citizens on Thansksgiving Day," says Carota.

"But it's for EVERYBODY. Be sure and tell them that," adds Betty Pieczarka.

The kitchen, located inside a converted restaurant building, is run by unpaid staff members using donated produce from the Grey Bears and Santa Cruz businesses. Its other bills are paid by donations from local Catholic churches and private persons.

Monthly budget runs about \$1500.

It may be a measure of hard times in Santa Cruz that the kitchen is serving some 200 people a day — more than twice the volume they had been expecting.

"There's really a need for this in Santa Cruz, and no one's really taking care of these people," says Carota, a warm, gentle man with an easy laugh.

And what care it is. Fresh carnations adorn the tables in the cheery, well-lit dining room, whose windows are frosted with steam from the hot vegetable soup. A sign reading "All we need is love" is displayed prominently on one wall. In the kitchen, you can hear volunteers singing songs.

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Carota agrees that the building is too small and they need larger space.

But time is running out. The group needs a