

Culture of Peace: Peace through feeding the hungry

By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

Posted Aug 27, 2017 at 2:37 PM

Updated Aug 27, 2017 at 2:37 PM

“In 1995 two dumpster sites in Ashland closed, and food was being thrown away,” remembers Pamala Joy. “That’s when I started Ashland Food Angels.” Joy and her 25 volunteers collect food donations from local supermarkets and bakeries and provide fresh ingredients for Ashland’s community meals.

Over this summer, Ashland Culture of Peace Ambassador Tam Masdon recognized the need to honor the unsung angelic heroes who dedicate their lives to bringing people and food together. Meanwhile, shifting demographics and attitudes have compromised some historic support for programs serving food. Masdon and I invited community food providers to the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) office to examine how efforts aligned with culture-of-peace values bring volunteers in touch with nitty-gritty chasms that need to be crossed before Ashland truly manifests a culture of peace.

A resident of Ashland for 50 years, Komac first noticed people being harassed in 2005. “Lots of my friends are suffering on the streets; women are (especially) vulnerable.” Every Sunday evening at the Lithia Park Gazebo, Komac puts his money and his heart in his stew along with all-organic ingredients and serves dinner. “It’s a ministry; they tell me about their lives.”

Like Komac, “I see the pain of the people that we feed each week,” says Maren Faye, who feeds 150 people a week at Uncle Food’s Diner. More than a soup kitchen, this community gathering, started by Peace house in 1993, aims to treat people with dignity and respect.

“I’m grateful to be using all this food that would normally be thrown away,” continues Faye, referencing the plethora of fresh ingredients contributed each week by the Food Angels. Faye is equally grateful for the 20 to 30 volunteers from all walks of life and the guests themselves who pitch in with chores.

Methodist outreach minister Dorita Borgerson partners with Peace House to provide Uncle Food's Diner. Borgerson's Family Meal Program, a special part of the community meal, takes place in the calmer upstairs of Wesley Hall, above Uncle Food's. "We serve a range of families, and we're there to talk with them and hear what's happening in their lives." Church members provide a playroom more suited to toys than the cars in which many families live.

Personal tragedy leads many to homelessness; personal tragedy led Vanessa Houk to better care for others. "The death of our son 19 years ago inspired us to help others because losing him was so painful," explained Houk, who, with her husband Jason, has been orchestrating the Friday night community peace meal.

Vanessa described what shifted her to supply dinners beyond Friday evening this summer. "I was sitting in on municipal court and learned that people were getting ticketed for stealing food." Houk agrees with Joy's philosophy. "It's a basic thing; everyone should have food and housing."

Borgerson describes another shift, this one national. "The homeless population used to be predominantly male and living in community. Much younger people who were graduated from high school during last decade's Great Recession have created an alternative (and more transient) life style that's different than the invisible poverty of those working and scraping by."

"How do we help the community understand the complexity of poverty — that someone could work at Walmart or McDonald's and not earn enough to live on?" Borgerson ponders. "How do we educate and inform so that others can open into compassion?"

Ana Witt, an early childhood educator with a large heart and a passion for service, asks, "How do we develop compassion instead of being confrontational? In a culture of peace," Witt surmises, "we would come to understand that people can't (get any) sleep on the street, that brains don't work so well when we don't sleep well, that folks acquire mental health symptoms from living on the street, that street people can't afford the meds they need, and that people smoke pot to (self-)medicate."

“I recognize what it’s like (on the street), living on the corner of invisibility and exposure,” says Vanessa Houk. “If (we were) living in a culture of peace, we’d have to make eye contact and see the suffering that people are experiencing.”

For Faye, “In a culture of peace, we’d have public restrooms,” and, for Jason Houk, “In a culture of peace, it wouldn’t be difficult to manifest things like a shelter.” Houk addresses a specific manifestation, germane to community meals. “The lack of a permanent kitchen limits our ability to store food.” In the words of Ana Witt, “When the kitchen that feeds the homeless is homeless itself, it creates anxiety.”

Besides compassion, other culture-of-peace values show up to mitigate such anxiety. Vanessa has witnessed accountability, inclusivity, and respect. “Guests at the Friday night peace meal share a sense of responsibility. They take out the trash; they help with clean-up. They thank us for the opportunity to feel productive and to feel a sense of worth and belonging. I notice how much people’s faces change when they relax.”

— *Bob Morse is an ambassador of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Email comments and questions to ashlandcpc@gmail.com. The ACPC website is www.ashlandcpc.org; like the commission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission; follow twitter.com/AshlandPeace on Twitter. All are welcome to join the ACPC’s Talking Circle at 11 a.m. each Tuesday and Community Meeting at 4 p.m. each Wednesday, both at the ACPC office, 33 First St., Suite 1, diagonally across Lithia Way from the Ashland Post Office.*



SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL

Wake up to the day’s top news, delivered to your inbox

