



Katie Holleran, Nancy McMullen and Mary Jo Lightholder gather in the kitchen at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Rochester. They each have attended church there for 30 years.



Reflections of a River Rat:

My church supper program for needy teaches me to humble, less judgmental

On a day when the world seemed intent on dragging me down, I found solace, even inspiration, in the charity displayed by two Potsdam State grads and the innocence of my daughter.

The headlines had been messing with my mind:

- Putin Invades Ukraine
- Trump Hails Putin as 'Genius'
- Winter Won't Relent: 6-8 Inches of Snow

After listening to a Syracuse basketball game, my car radio still was switched to a conservative station. I always am willing to hear what the other side thinks, but the vitriol was discouraging. "I'm telling, you don't visit Canada!" the

commentator shouted. “Trudeau is a dictator!” He sounded like a dropout from South Park – “Blame Canada!”

I checked my news feed on my phone. Marjorie Taylor Greene was declaring that racism had ended in the United States, but that critical race theory had revived it. Delusional as usual.

When I arrived for my volunteer shift at the church supper program, all of that contentiousness vanished, thanks to the Potsdam women. Their good will and positive energy can lift a room, in this case the basement level of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church.

Mary Jo Lightholder and Nancy McMullen were assembling dinners, gathering a turkey pot pie, green and fruit salads, pretzels, water and cookies into plastic grocery bags. They have formed a cohesive partnership – Mary Jo is the program director who works all day to solicit donations, supervise cooking and manage the operation. Nancy arrives in the late afternoon to oversee the distribution and cleanup. It’s a routine that happens five days a week.

“I would not be able to do what I do without Nancy,” Mary Jo said. “I am in awe of her and the gracious way she leads her life.”

Nancy, in turn, finds motivation in “the beautiful spirit that Mary Jo and all the volunteers bring to the program.”

Together, they distribute about 75 meals per night to the needy and homeless.

These two just missed each other at Potsdam. Nancy, a Watertown native, graduated in May 1975 with a degree in elementary education and sociology after practice teaching at Gouverneur Central School. Mary Jo arrived in Potsdam that September to begin her degree in history, then after college pursued her desire to travel. That led her into the restaurant business, cooking and venue management.

Lightholder and McMullen share a lot of memories from Potsdam – Clarkson hockey games, walking in sub-zero temperatures, the beauty of the Raquette River area, and keg parties when the drinking age was a mere 18 years old.

On this night, my daughter Katie and I joined the assembly line. Soon, we had about 75 dinners ready. The pandemic required that we abandon a sit-down

buffet, and instead hand out dinners to go. By 5:30 p.m., the doors swung open to receive a line of guests. I monitored the dinners; Katie passed out extra loaves of bread and bags of greens.

Two weeks ago, Katie had donated a yellow winter coat. The supper program doubles as a clothes closet, handing out hats, gloves and assorted pants, shirts and coats. Within minutes, a woman arrived wearing Katie's bright coat. That put a smile on my face.

Another man, his hands blue from the cold, asked for gloves. Nancy dug through our stash for a men's medium pair. He couldn't thank her enough. Another smile on my face.

Then came the young couple who were thrilled to collect their dinner, and plucked a warm blanket from the pile. Another smile.

"Hey Dad," Katie called out as I was assembling more dinners. "It's your buddy Kevin."

I looked up to greet Kevin, a former editorial assistant at the newspaper. He lost part of his social safety net when his mother died and now relies on the supper program. I greeted him with the same professional respect as if we were two colleagues crossing paths in the newsroom. His condition was not his choice. Nobody wants to be poor.

Kevin remembers Katie from 20 years ago. On most days, Mary and I made a 4 p.m. shuffle in the features department. I would arrive for the night shift on the sports desk; Katie, Liam and Claire would wait a few minutes for Mary to finish her editing for the day. Kevin still has a safety net. Another smile.

"I love the daily interactions with our guests, hopefully influencing them in a positive way," Mary Jo said. "I have had many life-changing experiences, and learned we can accomplish so much by being kind to one another."

Nancy has the resolve developed from years of teaching special education. Her classroom management skills are trained on the patrons. She knows who can take two or three dinners for friends in the same apartment building. She knows the community. She is not afraid to say "no" when a frequent flyer insists on two

dinners. When he complains, she remains unfazed. Sure enough, at our 6:30 closing, we had just enough to go around.

For her final act of the evening, she masterfully dealt with the man who shows some psychiatric issues. It was closing time and it was apparent he didn't want to leave. Nancy gently worked the situation with compassion and effectiveness. Another smile.

The tables were cleaned. Boxes stowed. Dishes washed. Time to go home.

During the drive, I asked my 36-year-old with Down syndrome if she had observed anything about the persons who shuffled through our food line. I was wondering if she noticed the clothes or appearances. Maybe she even spotted her old coat?

"I did notice one thing, Dad," she said. "Some of them remembered me by my name. They were all very polite and kind."

She didn't judge them. She didn't notice many differences. She didn't ridicule anyone for their social status. Her innocence was refreshing. I didn't smile. I beamed.

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