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Dining with dignity

By Bonnie Langston , Freeman staff



Diane Reeder, top right, sits with people she serves at the Queens Galley in Kingston. [Purchase a copy of this photo.](#)

Jonathan Bonner was a lunch guest at the Queens Galley on Washington Avenue in Kingston on Tuesday, and he plans to keep returning.

The price is right. Free. And he doesn't have to fill out forms to prove need. He simply signs in as a guest and takes a seat. His meal - sloppy Joe, French fries and fresh blackberries - is one of about 3,000 served monthly.

"I've been coming for about three weeks - breakfast, lunch and dinner," Bonner said. "The food is good. I find this place to be a savior of Kingston. We needed a place that served dinner. God bless 'em. And that's from the heart."

Unlike typical soup kitchens that offer lunch only, since last May, Queens Galley has served three meals daily in the dining room of Washington Manor, 254 Washington Ave., a rooming house for people with low incomes. The door is open 365 days a year.

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"Every single day of the year," said the agency's executive director, Diane Reeder. "People eat every day. They need to be fed every day."

She wants to help those who are dealing with "food insecurity," the limitation or uncertainty of available nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire them in socially acceptable ways.

It is obvious to her that food insecurity exists in Kingston. Many of the people who dine at the Queens Galley, she said, are the working poor, starting their day with breakfast and stopping in for dinner with their families.

"It's a frightening realization. People earning a living wage should be able to live on it," she said. "Welcome to Ulster County."

Besides making available made-from-scratch meals three times daily, Reeder said another important program component is the atmosphere in which those meals are offered. She intends for everyone to have a welcoming

dining experience that includes comfort and pleasure.

"You'll notice we don't use paper plates," Reeder said. "We don't use plastic utensils. It's dining with dignity. People who come through this door are our guests."

The Queens Galley, which earned non-profit status in 2004, had been run from the basements of churches until Reeder struck a deal with the owner of Washington Manor. The site's former dining program, which relied heavily on convenience foods, was losing money and on the verge of closure, Reeder said. When she said she could feed people for \$1 per meal, using whole foods prepared from scratch, the owner offered to pay her \$60 daily to cover meals for the 20 people in the building who are living at or below the poverty line.

In return, Queens Galley has use of the kitchen and pays no utility or rental fees. In addition, Reeder agreed to do 20 hours of administrative work at the Manor for which she - not Queens Galley - is paid.

"We're constantly cooking," Reeder said. "The downside of doing real food is it's labor-intensive. That's why volunteers are the lifeblood of an organization like this."

The program has about nine core volunteers, she said, although her computer database lists a total of about 90 helpers. The bulk of them tend to disappear after Christmas and Thanksgiving, Reeder said.

"You know what?" she said. "Come Easter, they're gone, and forget the Fourth of July."

Rose and Lou Felten, a retired couple who live in Kingston, are the exception. Since mid-November of last year, they have been giving their time to the program, about 10 hours weekly, setting tables, serving food, washing dishes and cleaning.

"Just helping people is great, whatever time you have," Rose Felten said, "and it's fun. It's a good feeling."

"It's the least we could do," her husband said.

Reeder said the need is ever-present.

"'Volunteer' is my favorite word in the English language," she said, "closely followed by 'donor.'"

Aside from the daily \$60 provided by Washington Manor, all other funding comes through donations from individuals, local businesses and a yearly fundraiser, The Hudson Valley Mayfaire, May 5 and 6, at the Ulster County Fair grounds in New Paltz.

Does the organization have enough money to keep going?

"Just," Reeder said.

Donations are welcome. In fact, even more welcome, she said, are discounts, because that keeps money in the

community. Reeder is hoping, for instance, to purchase milk at about half the typical \$3-per-gallon price, which is not affordable for Queens Galley. To save money, a reconstituted dry product is currently used.

Reeder said she makes a point to buy locally whenever possible, including produce, eggs and provisions from the regional food bank. Her organization spent more than \$32,000 in the area last year, she said.

One of the most successful programs of Queens Galley, Reeder said, started last summer at the farmers' market in Kingston. A booth, run by the soup kitchen, assists people with food stamps in purchasing produce, which they previously could not do with credit-like cards that have replaced the old paper "stamps." Users swipe their cards through an electronic device, then they are given tokens equal to the amount indicated.

It was an encounter at the farmers' market in Kingston seven years ago, in fact, that moved Reeder to eventually found the Queens Galley. She was shopping there with vouchers from a supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children, better known as WIC, when she encountered another woman doing the same, only looking bewildered.

"She said, 'The only thing I know how to cook is potatoes,'" Reeder recalled.

What followed was her first food-focused workshop.

"We went from the farmers' market to her kitchen," she said. "Then the next week we did the same thing."

Free workshops presented by the Queens Gallery include Food Stamp Programs and Mother's Culinary workshop, which individuals can request. Programs meant for larger groups, like schools, are the Stone Soup Workshops, which follows the food stamp budget guides of \$1 each for meals, and the Dinner Party Program, geared for students ages 10 to 14.

As for the dining experience at Washington Manor, guests seem at home in the open sunny room as they enjoy a meal in solitude or chatting with friends and new acquaintances. Manor residents Rufus Scott, 54, and Evelyn Kehr, 84, for instance, find the opportunity a plus for their lives.

"The meals program is very good here," Scott said. "And the way they prepare the food, they're very health-conscious, and there's always plenty."

Kehr proved the latter part, at least, of her table partner's comment.

"I was hungry today," she said. "I ate two orders."

To volunteer with the Queens Galley, call (845) 338-3468 or sign up at the Web site www.thequeensgalley.org, where one also can contribute \$5 by registering at Malls.org. Donations also can be made through the Web site NYCharities.org, or by sending a check to: The Queens Galley, 254 Washington Ave., Kingston, NY 12401.