MESH Overnight Respite

The frigid, forceful winds of January whistled like a roller coaster ride for both MESH, Inc and the homeless in our community. MESH’s sign flashes in the showcase window of Union Baptist Church announcing Code Blue and the opening of MESH overnight respite doors when temperatures reach 32 degrees and below and are life threatening.

Code Blue respite is a solution, though not ideal, for helping our homeless neighbors. It is not likely that anyone would choose to spend a night outside when the thermometer reads just above freezing. Nonetheless. MESH’s limited funds must cover monthly rental for the respite hall during winter months and, of course, payroll for every Code Blue night.

MESH’s first shift staff sets up cots for overnight respite by 8:30 pm and welcomes guests for the night at 9:00 at Union Baptist’s hall on Midland Avenue. Union has put in a much needed new boiler and has updated the men’s bathroom to be wheelchair accessible. The generosity of the Affinity Company provided a donation of five new adult cots and a local Girl Scout troop provided pillows and blankets for MESH 2020 overnight respite.

All guests are required to sign in and assure staff that they have no drugs, alcohol or weapons. Guests must reveal their belongings and give permission to be briefly checked by our security guard and team leader. The staff exhibits caring attitudes so guests feel comfortable. The MESH respite has been averaging 12 men and four women, in divided gender areas. The MESH respite can accommodate up to 25 beds for the homeless when temperatures drop to 32 degrees. Guests receive a pillow and pillow case, sheet and blanket, which are kept in a labeled, jumbo plastic bag for them to use with a cot nightly. These items are washed by MESH staff monthly. After 11:00 pm, any additional guests are brought in by the police if space permits. MESH’s second staff shift runs from 11:30 to 7:30 am; Overnight guests are awakened at 6:00 am. The cook comes in to prepare a breakfast for our overnight guests before they go on their way at 7:30.
Chez MESH
by Albert Lahndt

The first days of the dinner week with MESH start after a beracha (short prayer) at synagogues. Diners at MESH meals gather at 6:00 pm and are served at 6:30. On Monday we are at Bnai Keshet on S. Fullerton St. Bnai Keshet serves light fare, often Mediterranean style. The serving staff is comprised mainly of students and it changes a lot. Although courses are limited to small portions, the food is tasty and wholesome and seconds are usually available.

The fare at Tuesday’s synagogue, Shamrei Emunah on Park St., north of Bloomfield, is mainly fish deliciously prepared and served in abundance. The down side is that there is a 25-person limit. To insure a place at the table, diners usually have to arrive and wait outside by 5:45 PM, often in disagreeable weather.

Routinely feeding about 75 people, the Unitarian Universalist church hosts the largest MESH meal every week. To the accompaniment of many accomplished musicians, appetizer, soup, salad, entree, and dessert courses are served after a reading and a moment of silence.

Fore and aft desserts, printed menus, warm hospitality, and mixed table and buffet service are key features of the dining experience on Thursdays at Rising Mount Zion church. The meal is followed by a take-away (con’t, next page)

The MESH Café at Bnai Keshet
We plan to highlight different café partners each newsletter.

Every Monday, from September through June, MESH guests are welcomed into MESH Partner, Bnai Keshet's cozy café area, where five round tables set for seven and covered by magenta tablecloths greet them.

Since meals served at Bnai Keshet must be Kosher, meat cannot be served at the same meal with dairy, so MESH coordinator, Ruth Davis says, "It's just easier to serve dairy meals." A typical meal could include cheese and crackers, a lentil soup thick enough to be called "stew," lasagna and brownies for dessert.

Ruth has been coordinating the MESH Café at Bnai Keshet for four years. She uses an on-line SignUpGenius where volunteers indicate when they’ll help and what they will bring. Ruth says she has learned to be specific with her asks. Rather than, "Can you help with MESH?," it's "Can you bring an appetizer on a particular day?" Though, when she began, she was present each week at the café, Ruth now has co-captains she can rely on to supervise on other Mondays. Students and their parents from each class of the Synagogue’s Hebrew School are encouraged to serve at least one Monday dinner each year. Bnai Keshet is blessed with other volunteers too, like the Montclair Bahai Community and the Girl Scouts.

Ruth runs the kitchen with incredible efficiency. She and high school regulars, like the youngsters who came on January 6th, Charlotte, Walter and Ruth’s son, Cameron, spooned food onto Eco-Friendly disposable plates, loaded them onto a food trolley and wheeled them out to the café, to serve their hungry guests.

MESH staff member, K’Hari Tassey, says Bnai Keshet is one of his favorite MESH sites because he enjoys the variety of volunteers there. And our security guard, Joe Tyson, adds, "The children who volunteer here are really into it." Two youngsters, new to MESH, Noni and Gwen, demonstrated his observation. They showed up to help for the first time and joined right in, serving guests with hot drinks and smiles.
service consisting of bagels, pastries and water. There seems always enough for all.

This writer likes to say that MESH meal venues Monday through Thursday rotate horizontally, while the Friday venues rotate vertically among St. John’s Church, St Peter Claver Church, Union Baptist Church and Christ Church, in that order. Students do most of the serving and they change frequently.

Movies or live music are the unique features of the Saturday venue at Grace Presbyterian church. Vegetarian menu selections are available at all MESH venues.

Bad weather and the change between Eastern Standard Time and Daylight Saving Time frequently make the MESH dining schedule uncertain. Calling Dr. Gwen Parker Ames, Executive Director, at 862-621-9488 (mobile) or sending email to drgpaisin@yahoo.com usually gets reliable information. The back-up role played by Bright Hope church often saves the day. MESH has even been known to commandeer a restaurant when no other solution presents itself.

This writer has compiled a list of 11 (so far) local area churches serving their own meals. I call it Combined Community Meal Calendars Tabular, and it’s currently in its fifth edition. Updates are made as churches in the greater Montclair area performing this type of community service are discovered. Limited copies are available in print for the asking, but unlimited electronic copies can be obtained by calling 862-219-2381 or by emailing to scribbletribe@yahoo.com.

The MESH Café at Shomrei Emunah

Shomrei Emunah’s amazingly equipped Kosher kitchen—everything in duplicate for a meat side and a dairy side—fills with activity every Tuesday evening. There, dedicated volunteers create MESH meals almost entirely from scratch. Congregants can sign up on line to volunteer for MESH dinners. Of course, many volunteers serve often.

MESCH Café co-chairs, Lynne Kurzweil and Aileen Grossberg were both in attendance on January 14th. With the help of volunteers, like Beryl Hiller and student, Jonah who is “almost always” there to help, they mixed and shaped individual turkey meatloaves, chopped ingredients for cabbage salad with miso dressing and prepared potatoes and vegetables. Aileen said they often had dairy meals, especially fish, or sometimes a vegetable stew.

But that evening was a meat meal—no dairy allowed—and everyone was careful to use only the knives and chopping boards from the meat side of the kitchen. Including youngsters, Orly and Elana who chopped and mixed up a beautiful fresh fruit salad for dessert.

With only room for seating 25 at Shomrei’s tables, guests line up early outside the synagogue to get numbered cards to be seated in the brightly lit, upstairs dining area. There, high school volunteers Jordana, Jahiaida and John serve them beverages and food, as prepared dishes are wheeled out on trollies from the kitchen.

If more guests arrive, they join MESH Security person, Joe Tyson, in the lobby where they can pick up a meal to go.

Shomrei’s website says, "Feeding the hungry is among the most basic examples of gemilut hassadim (acts of loving kindness) Jews can perform." And many Shomrei Emunah members "are among the most dedicated participants" in "working devotedly to eradicate hunger from our community."
I am proud to boast that all of our MESH Café partners take pride in their food presentations and the nourishment it provides to the food insecure guests served each week. MESH, Inc. partnered with Montclair State University Nutrition and Food Studies Department and our Cafe partners to discover if the food insecure guests shared similar sentiments. Over the past year, our research partners at Montclair State University discussed with our guests: “How does the food make you feel?”. This question prompted a qualitative investigation to illuminate the needs of impoverished guests at the emergency services table.

This study was done under the auspice of the Montclair State University (MSU) Institutional Review Board. Researcher participants included Paul Paez and Dana Schules Montclair State University graduate students in Nutrition and Food Science, Dr. Shahla Wunderlich, a Registered Dietitian and Emeritus Professor of Nutrition and Food Studies at Montclair State University, Dr. Charles Feldman, Fulbright Scholar and Professor in the Food Systems program and Dr. Gwen Parker Ames, Executive Director of Montclair Emergency Services for the Homeless and an Adjunct Professor at MSU.

A number of propositions were postulated in the literature for the causes of homelessness and the obstacles that accompany it. Researchers have hypothesized that homelessness links to social conditions, engagement in maladaptive behavior, personal failure and financial burdens. A predominance of research focuses on the nutritional assessment of food insecure and homeless individuals. However, data from the investigations were collected only by surveying the staff and directors of these food banks and food emergency programs, overlooking the thoughts and feelings of those who eat the food. Few studies explored the emotional and somatic dimensions of homelessness that give this population a voice in research.

Sixty-three emergency foodservice guests were given demographic surveys and interviewed during multiple sessions at three churches and temples in a northeastern US suburb in 2019. A Grounded Theory Approach and a Grand Tour Question (“How does the food here make you feel?”), were utilized. To evolve the conceptual model, the researchers analyzed the discursive findings (by triangulation among 3-multi-raters) from the previous interviews, then presented them at successive interview sessions for commentary and refinement among those interviewed.

They found that 35% of those interviewed received degrees beyond high school, 9.5% reported having military service, 52.3% were never married. The following six-themes were uncovered:

- **Nutrition and Palatability**: Reported to be adequate or better by the majority;
- **Complacency**: Guests not actively finding ways to change, improve, or have not yet found a means to better support themselves;
- **Taking Action**: Those actively practicing, or seeking, ways to improve their lives;
- **Status Seekers**: Those who felt above the various homeless class systems;
- **Burden**: Those who felt that extraneous situations kept them from improving their social standing.
- **Isolation**: Loneliness, disconnect, and alienation among other guests, family, friends, peers, and by-passers.

It was discovered those interviewed have a number of unmet needs falling outside of their concern for food or nutrition, including recognition as equals, inclusivity within society engagement in a family dynamic, and communication for friendship building. Meals at MESH Inc. offer an opportunity to address these issues. Our research findings entitled “Commensality around the Emergency Foodservice Table”: will be presented at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario and the University of Athens in Athens, Georgia this spring.
Homeless and Hunger Awareness

Homeless and Hunger Awareness Fairs are "wide games" for young participants, grades K-8. By visiting each of eight stations, not necessarily in order, they are introduced to the challenges encountered by our homeless and hungry neighbors. We raise their awareness as they attempt to recognize homeless persons, discover how easy it is for each of us to spread germs, and taste their own concoctions made, as the hungry might do it, from condiments found at fast food restaurants. They also experiment with creating a shelter from cardboard and newspaper and think about how the homeless might handle personal hygiene. Participants have fun and expand their knowledge of the problems of homelessness at the same time.

We held our first Homeless and Hunger Awareness fair of the season for 625 students at Glenfield Middle School on January 16th. The Principal wanted to promote generosity and community service from a hands-on perspective. The fair started with Director, Dr. Gwen Ames, sharing the mission of MESH and clarifying the difference between homelessness and food insecurity. A discussion and our short film produced a few year ago, "Suburban Homeless," was viewed. Afterwards, the children offered feedback and were dismissed to go to their classrooms to sort 2,000 pairs of socks donated by the employees of Kessler Institute. The middle school students also created cards of inspiration to place, along with the sock size, inside ziploc bags containing the socks. After the sock sorting, the students proceeded to the fair to expand their understanding of homelessness and hunger from an insider perspective. Teachers de-briefed students for 30 minutes and the school day ended. From Tuesday January 21st thru January 31st, twelve MESH 32 campaign, gallon containers were placed in classrooms to promote the collection of funds in support of the MESH 32 degree campaign.

Bloomfield College fraternity and sorority volunteers assisted in the presentation of the Homeless and Hunger Awareness fair.

MESH hosted another Homeless and Hunger Awareness Fair at Watchung Elementary School on Martin Luther King Day. Our six volunteers led approximately 50 students and parents in the activities. We collected $320.00 in donations.

For the second year, MESH also participated in MLK Day of Hope at Union Baptist Hall with guests who had spent respite there. Youth from Buzz Adrin Middle School helped to display and distribute clothing, magazines and board games and helped served a lunch provided by The Affinity Group (the food company that provided the food for our Winter Concert.) The day began at 8:00 with breakfast, included a MESH "Town Hall" from 12:30 to 1:30, then lunch and entertainment lasting until 4:00.