

St. Vincent de Paul's Dining Room 35 Years Strong

By: Debbie Shelley / The Catholic Commentator

The multiplication of loaves and fishes written about in Scriptures can be seen daily at the St. Vincent de Paul Society Dining Room, which celebrates its 35th anniversary this year. An initial "just do it" spark of faith among the society's lay volunteers moved the dining room from its humble beginnings in a house on 21st Street in Baton Rouge to its much expanded facilities within the St. Vincent de Paul complex serving a variety of needs of the poor and marginalized.

In the early 1980s, SVdP lay leaders Fred Griggs, Rosie and Laura Martina, Marvin Ourso, Bill LeBlanc, Jewel Newman, Claude Doucet and others worked together to address the issue of hunger in the Capital City.

"Fred knew of someone who had a house on south 2st1 Street that was vacant at that time, and the owner agreed to let St. Vincent de Paul open a dining room at that location," said Michael Acaldo, president and CEO of SVdP.

Rosie Martina, who recently celebrated his 94th birthday and remains active in SVdP, said Griggs, who is now deceased, asked for his help in establishing the dining room in the 1980s.

"He said, 'Rosie, do you have a truck? I'm thinking of starting a dining hall for St. Vincent de Paul and I need some help,'" said Martina. "I said, 'Yeah, I'd be glad to.'"

Martina, who was already actively involved in the social justice committee of St. Jude Church in Baton Rouge, delivered food to Victory Baptist Church on Greenwell Springs Road, where the donated items would be transferred to trucks from different religious denominations.

"There was no dining hall at the time," he said.

Griggs was also looking for a food storage facility when someone donated the house on 21st Street, which became the first St. Vincent de Paul Dining Room.

Martina recalled. "We had a cast iron stove and small pots, and we were feeding 25 to 50 people seven days a week," Martina said. "We had no air-conditioning, no dishwasher and only a single sink."



Bishop Robert W. Muench on left, St. Vincent de Paul Society lay leader, Rosie Martina, and SVdP kitchen supervisor, Denise Spears served volunteers who gathered for a celebration of the 35th anniversary of the SVdP Dining Room on July 28. Photo by Debbie Shelley | The Catholic Commentator

In 1984, St. Vincent de Paul purchased a lot on 15th Street and constructed a dining hall and kitchen. Martina said Griggs put him to work helping to build the two-story building. When the kitchen and dining hall opened up, the agency was able to feed 200 to 300 people a day. Martina, with the help of his daughter and “limo driver” Patricia, still picks up donations from restaurants and stores within the community and brings them to the dining hall, where he is warmly greeted by staff, volunteers and diners. He humbly considers his service just part of who he is. Growing up on a family farm with a poor family, his family gave sweet potatoes and other vegetables from the garden to migrant workers passing through, he said.

“You do what you can and do what God tells you to do,” said Martina.

This “role up your sleeve” attitude allows SVdP to be the organization that provides more meals than all local dining halls combined, said Acaldo. He said this year the dining room will serve more than 250,000 meals, and by the end of the year or early next year, the dining room will have served five million meals to the poor and marginalized since its beginning.

“This is made possible through the generosity of donated items, finances and time of many people,” said Acaldo.

Among those people include Crystal Chatelain, who has served SVdP in a variety of capacities during the past 20 years and is currently the society’s council president.

He also commended St. Vincent de Paul kitchen supervisor Denise Spears.

“Denise and her staff do a great job,” Acaldo said. “It can be hard to put a meal together, but it’s delicious. What is donated has to be put to good use – you have to be creative. It’s important that we don’t have a lot of waste.”

The bishops of the Diocese of Baton Rouge have also been big supporters. Acaldo remembers that even as the late Bishop Stanley J. Ott dealt with the ravages of cancer, he served in the dining room on holidays.

Bishop Robert W. Muench also makes SVdP a priority.

“When he’s serving in the dining room, he goes around visiting people,” Acaldo said.

He said the bishop’s father served as a Vincentian in New Orleans for many years.

“He gets the importance of reaching out to those in need,” said Acaldo, who noted that the bishop has “blessed a lot of buildings.”

Looking to the future, Acaldo said he is excited that for Thanksgiving, in addition to serving at the dining hall, which averages 600-700 meals, SVdP will be working with Holiday Helpers to provide meals at Raising Cane’s River Center, which averages about 1,200 meals. Acaldo said with homeless camps being reported in areas where they had not been in the past, the instability of families and food insecurity mean the work of St. Vincent de Paul will be ongoing.

While many may look to the government to “do something,” Acaldo said it’s faith, and faith-based communities, such as SVdP, that lift people through hard times.

“Faith-based activities are ultimately the answer,” said Acaldo. “When something doesn’t seem possible, it’s God who gives us the strength to do it.”