

Exemplary Social Services Hosted by Sacred Places

Hunger and Homelessness

Photograph by Ashley Collinson, courtesy of Broad Street Ministry



Bruce trims the hair of a Breaking Bread participant in the salon he created at Broad Street Ministry

BREAKINGBREAD

at Broad Street Ministry

By Ann de Forest

In the boiler room in the back of an old urban church, a barber with a graying goatee and a do-rag has set up a small but serviceable “salon.” “I’ll make you look like a prince and feel like a king,” the barber, Bruce, promises as he drapes a towel around a customer’s neck. The tiny space is alive with scents and sounds – the whirr of an electric razor, the *whoosh* of running water, the lingering aroma of aftershave – all accompanied by Bruce’s upbeat conversation.

“Ain’t nobody touch my hair but him,” says a satisfied customer, Charles, a Vietnam vet with a dapper moustache who has lived on the street for years. He folds a dollar and sticks it in a nearby tip jar.

“Have a blessed day,” says Bruce, already settling the next customer into the chair. “And thank you very much for your tip.” At Bruce’s salon,

the haircuts are free. But Bruce knows that the tip jar brings dignity to the transaction. “Being a man myself, I know I feel much better when I’m paying for it.”

Dignity is what distinguishes the services that Broad Street Ministry offers each week to the homeless in Center City Philadelphia through its Breaking Bread program. Every Thursday, just before 11:00, men and women of varying ages and ethnicities gather outside the grand neo-Gothic building on South Broad Street, just across from the Kimmel Center, many lugging backpacks or shopping bags stuffed with their worldly possessions. The red doors swing open and those gathered step down into a spacious dining hall where tables are set for a banquet, with bright table-



Photograph by Ashley Collinson

Sand art projects after lunch

cloths and flowerpots as centerpieces. Unlike at many other feeding programs, “there’s no standing in line,” says Paul, a regular. The more than 200 homeless and hungry men and women who come to Breaking Bread every Thursday sit down at the tables to eat family-style, their lunch served by volunteers. “It’s a good lunch,” says Paul. “It beats eve-



Photograph by Molly Lester



(Clockwise from left):
An art show by Breaking Bread participants; a lunchtime volunteer; Michael Polembro offers health screenings; Broad Street Ministry occupies the former Chambers-Wylie Presbyterian Church

rything else in the city.” Adds his friend Bob, “And the people are so open and welcoming.”

“Vibrant,” is how Angelo Sgro, Executive Director of the Bethesda Project, which provides housing and support services to the chronically homeless throughout the city, describes BSM’s outreach programs. “I have the utmost respect for Bill Golderer (BSM’s Founder and Convening Minister) and what he’s trying to do... He gets an idea in his head and he doesn’t mull it over for too long. He goes ahead and does it... Every city has someone who makes things happen. Bill is one of those people.”

In 2005, Bill saw the potential in the boarded-up Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church, a vast, vacant edifice that interrupted the resurgence of South Broad Street in Philadelphia. Today, the year-old Breaking Bread program is an outgrowth of Broad Street Ministry’s inclusive liturgy that draws young city dwellers, suburbanites and homeless neighbors together for

worship every Sunday night. As program director Wendy Gaynor says, “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we’re here on Broad Street. This location confers a lot of responsibility, and this building has a lot of issues, but we love it and are grateful to work from here.”

In 2005, Bill Golderer saw the potential in the boarded-up Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church on South Broad Street

In the same spirit of hospitality and creativity, Breaking Bread has always been much more than a lunch program. From the start, Wendy and her staff envisioned a true ministry that “reaches out to those who are often overlooked and aims to provide them with necessities that are both tangible and relevant.” Those who come in for a meal find ready access to a wide range of

essential services, from legal advice to mental health counseling to assistance from the Benefits Bank, a program that helps those in need “cut through red tape” and determine what government benefits they are entitled to receive. The Benefits Bank process takes patience, says Cy Schwartz, a retired educator who runs the program as a volunteer. “But sit with me for 45 minutes and you might find out you’re eligible for \$176 in food stamps.”

Michael Polembro, a resident nurse, is also on site every week to perform health checks and monitor medications. In keeping with Breaking Bread’s holistic approach to meeting the needs of the homeless, Michael recently introduced a pre-lunch meditation session that has become very popular. One homeless man, who struggles with anger management issues, credits meditation with giving him “a longer fuse.”

The hair salon began as another practical service that, with Bruce’s empathetic and ebullient personality,

soothes troubled men's spirits as well. As he carefully guides his razor across a man's scalp, Bruce responds to what he thinks each customer needs: cheerful patter, advice or a listening ear. "I don't just cut their hair," he says, "it's a little ministry, too. I got you in the chair, you can't move," he jokes, then turns serious. "Sometimes when you get these men one on one, you break them down. I say 'Great. It's all right to cry. It eases the soul.'"

In many ways, Bruce embodies Broad Street Ministry's participatory, holistic model for serving its urban community. He was himself homeless when he first came to a church service, drawn in by the choir's "heavenly voices." Bill and Wendy recognized his talents not only as a musician, but also as a trained carpenter and plumber. By Bruce's estimate, he has renovated at least six rooms in the century-old church to keep expanding and improving the services Broad Street Ministry can offer the homeless, including an office for a psychologist who comes in three times a week, and his own cozy, welcoming salon in a corner of the basement boiler room.

"It's an amazing retrofitting of a space that wasn't designed to do anything but provide utilities for the building," says Cy, the Benefits Bank

counselor, of the back-room salon. In a space not much larger than a coatroom, Bruce has set up a barber's chair, a shampooing station with sink, a lounge chair for waiting, and a mirror, donated by a mosaic artist. Assisted by Camille, a student at University of the Arts

"There's something about [a church]," says Angelo Sgro of the Bethesda Project, "that gets people inside. And if you don't get them inside, you can't work with them."

who volunteers as hair washer, Bruce typically cuts "twenty-two heads in two hours."

As other programs that serve the homeless are being hit by increased numbers and dwindling funding, Broad Street Ministry aims to expand. The church's location and mission made it an ideal setting for one of Bethesda Project's winter "cafés," providing temporary shelter for the most intransigent homeless in the coldest months of the year. "If we hadn't provided this space these people would be out in this bitter cold and dying," says Sgro. "There's something about [a church]," he adds, "that gets people inside. And if you don't get them

inside, you can't work with them. We have placed a lot of people from the cafes into more permanent housing."

"It's a dynamic, growing place," says Cy Schwartz. In addition to Breaking Bread, the church offers free dinner after worship services on Sunday and hosts a monthly No Barriers Dinner, designed to bring Philadelphia residents from all walks of life together for a family-style meal. A plan is also in place to renovate an ample but outdated kitchen, and Bruce hopes that showers will be the next amenity he's asked to build.

Right now, though, Bruce is sending a customer off with a bracing splash of Aqua Velva. He might run into the same guy later in the week, sitting on the street or camped out on the Parkway. Wherever he sees his customers, he greets them as friends. Freshly shampooed, hair well trimmed, "they look," he says, "like a million bucks. And they're feeling like a million bucks." ♦



(Left to right): Broad Street Ministry is prominently located in Philadelphia, just a few blocks from City Hall; Wendy Gaynor (top left) is joined by Bruce (bottom left) and other Breaking Bread friends



Photographs by Molly Lester (left) and Ashley Collinson (right)



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