

A long tradition at the Meriden Soup Kitchen

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Imagine preparing and serving up to 200 meals a day, every weekday of the year with no paid help, and doing this challenging task for 33 years. This is exactly what the Meriden Soup Kitchen has accomplished for decades, and continues to do today.

Founded in 1983 by a faith community, the Meriden Soup Kitchen is a massive volunteer effort fully responsible for providing nutritious hot lunches to Meriden's hungry individuals and families. It takes a generous community to feed those who face hunger every day and nowhere is this more evident than the operation of the Meriden soup Kitchen.

The Soup Kitchen is comprised completely of more than 160 volunteers, most of whom are retired senior citizens. They work together seamlessly to provide high quality lunches at their central downtown location: First Baptist Church on Broad St., which has hosted the soup kitchen for the past 15 years.

Pastor Leon Hebrink noted, "We are pleased to offer a central location in the heart of our community. This is part of our church mission and a number of our congregation members also serve as volunteers. We need to be engaged with the people in need."

The daily operation involves volunteers from five local churches and two ecumenical groups. Each group is responsible for a specific day of the week for the food preparation, serving and cleanup. Every weekday the soup kitchen serves, on average, over 170 individuals for lunch. This number usually swells to over 200 near the end of the month, according to Tim Granucci, president and longtime volunteer of the Meriden Soup Kitchen.

"When I was an elementary school teacher in Cheshire, my students would give me mugs at Christmas every year," he said. "After receiving so many mugs, I thought it would be a better idea to ask my students to make a donation to a needy cause. I recommended the Meriden Soup Kitchen. This began my involvement, although I had never visited the soup kitchen until I retired and became a volunteer." As president, Tim oversees the total operation of the soup kitchen.

A typical day finds "clients" (attendees) gathering by mid-morning outside the back doors of the church. Most of them are familiar with the lunch routine and when the doors open at 11 a.m. (earlier if the weather is cold), they file in taking their usual place at the tables lined up in the spacious church hall, which is well lit and inviting with Christmas decorations highlighting the holiday season. There is a mix of men, women, and even some children who come for the lunch (which consists of soup, salad and a main course with fresh vegetables). Baked goods are available for dessert. Anyone can have seconds as they wish.

Peter Burch is a longtime volunteer and directs "Bonnie's Angels," the Wednesday group. This group has a long history of working together. They arrive around 7:30 a.m. to begin food preparations and continue until 12:30 p.m. cleanup. Peter keeps things running smoothly throughout the morning. He has been a volunteer for 16 years and also serves on the board of directors, helps with fundraising and runs the website. "I enjoy the work but most importantly doing a mission of value," he said. "People come here hungry and leave filled, and I'm glad to be a part of this."

Peter also enjoys working with his fellow volunteers like Ann and Joe Giannetti. Ann Giannetti has been a volunteer for seven years and she is in charge of preparing the soup. "I wanted to do something to help in the community and I enjoy the team effort," she said. "We make our soup with fresh vegetables," making sure it is both tasty and nutritious. "It makes me feel good when I walk out the door every day." Her husband Joe said, "I do the salad and the dishes and also pitch in with everything." The Giannettis really love what they do.

Another indispensable volunteer is Nancy Kraft. She has been involved for over 18 years and is one of the senior members of the Bonnie's Angels team. Nancy is a tireless worker who takes charge of the food purchasing and acquisition and makes daily trips to pick up and deliver food supplies. She pays special attention to ensuring a good supply of nutritious ingredients for food preparation. Nancy first got involved when she saw a notice in the newspaper seeking volunteers for the soup Kitchen. "When I retired, I wanted to give back. I get much more out of this than I give," she said, humbly. Needless to say, Nancy is a highly valued volunteer whose contributions to this vibrant soup kitchen are incalculable.

It is amazing to watch the Soup Kitchen in action. The good-natured volunteers act in unison like the movement of a Swiss watch. Each has specific duties and roles, all of which are perfectly orchestrated. Many of the volunteers I spoke with commented how appreciative the clients were who always thanked them for their meals. And let me join them in thanking the Meriden soup Kitchen volunteers for embodying the Christmas spirit of giving all year long.

Michael S. Rohde is a former mayor and city councilor of Meriden.



By Michael S. Rohde