

Mercy Story Two – February

It was the most natural thing in the world for her to do.

After all, there they stood, night after night, in all weather, summer and winter, hundreds of them, young and old, men and women, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, drunk or spaced out or just plain homeless, well-clad and ill-clad, encircling the sprawling brick “Mission” in a long queue, waiting for the door to open at 7:00 p.m. so that they could have at least a mat on the floor to sleep on, sheltered from the elements for a few hours. She could see through the glass outer doors that they were being admitted one at a time, searched, and deprived of everything but the clothes on their back until morning. And they looked so hungry, nearly all of them.

So, one winter’s day she went home and phoned a friend. Between the two of them, they cooked up a huge batch of chili, bought boxes of disposable bowls, spoons, cups and napkins, prepared gallons of hot chocolate and showed up with it and some collapsible serving tables at 6:00 p.m. the following Sunday evening in front of the “Mission”.

“Anybody interested in having a Sidewalk Party?” she called out to the folks already standing in the queue. “Just line up here for a bowl of chili and some hot chocolate.”

And that’s how it all began, the Sunday evening Sidewalk Parties out in front of the “Mission”.

Word spread. More and more homeless folk began showing up at 6:00 p.m. to join in the Party. More and more people got wind of what was happening and decided to help out with food, winter clothes, and other donations. Some came just to make sandwiches and dish out the meals. A grocery chain donated stacks of fresh bread products which they delivered to her house every weekend. Another store donated peanut butter and jam and other spreads to use on the bread. People baked cakes and cupcakes and just showed up with them. Someone donated several large insulated food and drink containers, mostly from disbanded oil exploration camps. A Chinese wedding reception sent over a feast of fresh leftovers. A Metis Settlement cooked up hams and turkeys for Christmas and delivered them hot and ready for distributing. Her parish supplies both food and helpers on many occasions. A reporter showed up and interviewed guests and hosts, triggering a new wave of donors and helpers. Her husband and six kids stand behind her 100%.

“It’s not about the food,” she insists. “It’s about relationships.” So now, while others serve up the food, she spends most of her time mingling with the people, connecting with their stories, teasing and being teased, underscoring the identity and personal worth of each one.

She has resisted overtures from the city and the province to organize the “program”, to subsidize it, and to formalize it. While appreciating the good intentions behind these overtures, she prefers the genuineness of real human beings responding to real human beings in real ways. She has no agenda, no axe to grind, no desire for “recognition”. For her, “The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven...” (*Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*)