

Lunch program nourishes body, soul

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In 1983, two area residents approached a study group at St. Mary's Church about establishing a free lunch program in Iowa City. They identified a need, created a partnership and founded the Free Lunch Program of Iowa City.

By providing hot meals for people in need, the Free Lunch Program has been a welcome oasis in our community for more than 25 years. While the cornerstone of this program is about assisting with the most basic of human needs, it also is about more than simply serving meals. It's about doing so with warmth, compassion and dignity.

Six days a week all year, 35 different volunteer serving teams take turns providing a full plate with no questions asked to an average of 120 guests a day. Sheryl Kilbey, currently living at Shelter House, has a part-time, minimum-wage job. She says that she appreciates "having a warm place to socialize and eat for free, and the caring and respect shown to us by the volunteers."

Libris Fidelis was homeless for most of six years at various times and in different places. His homelessness ended in Iowa City in 2006.

According to Fidelis, "The one anchor in those years was the ability to sit down like a citizen and eat a meal in comfort and peace, which allowed me to feel as a person again." He added, "Out of at least 26 free meal kitchens I have visited, Free Lunch in Iowa City is one of only three such advocacy organizations in nine states that consistently provide an excellent atmosphere and really great food."

The volunteer members of the serving teams say that they receive much more by participating in the program than they give back. Mary Chase, a volunteer from Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, echoes the thoughts of many of the volunteers when she commented, "I love the camaraderie of our volunteers. The guests are very appreciative of the good food and we always receive lots of thank you's."

Betsy Momany of the Clear Creek Amana team adds, "By volunteering with the Free Lunch Program, we are able to provide some of our eighth-grade students the opportunity to show what they can do outside the classroom. Providing a meal for those

who have none is a wonderful way for our youth to understand the meaning of community and service."

Susan White, University of Iowa associate professor of painting and drawing, is coordinator of the FLP's newest serving team, UI Studio Artists.

"This past year has been such an extraordinary experience having art students and the organic gardening students work together in service to our community," White said. "I have been focusing on ideas of responsibility with my students, particularly in light of a larger need to have our young adults think about stewardship and their world."

Respecting the dignity of the guests has been the cornerstone of service at the Free Lunch Program. This guiding principle of unconditional respect and hospitality has been as integral to the program as the hot, nourishing meals.