



## Serving on the Front Line

By Lynn P. Ingram

**H**ad Deacon Tim Sullivan turned a different corner on that warm summer day in 2002, tens of thousands of homeless Detroiters may never have felt the helping hand of his Peanut Butter and Jelly, or “PBJ,” ministry, which has been feeding the city’s poorest population for more than 10 years.

Instead, he went where fate led him, and he was in exactly the right place at the right time.

“I was walking in Boston Common around lunchtime and there was a young lady with a card table set up making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless,” Sullivan said. “I thought, ‘What a great idea.’ Then, on the flight home I thought, ‘That’s what I’m going to do when I get back to Detroit.’”

And he did.

“When I got back, I started making plans, first of all deciding what location to use,” he recalled. “I remembered there was an area between the Jeffries Freeway and downtown that was a large gathering spot for the homeless, so I went there and saw it was still there and was kind of a ‘homeless village.’ That’s when I determined I had found the spot.”

Now, more than a decade later, hundreds of volunteers, including dozens of Michigan lawyers and judges, have spent their Saturday mornings making sandwiches; passing out food, clothing, and books; and providing much-needed fellowship to the poorest of the poor in Detroit’s infamous Cass Corridor.

The PBJ ministry reaches several hundred homeless people every week and has touched the lives of thousands over the years.

But it has done more than just help the poor. It has also had a surprising and pleasant impact on the volunteers.

“I get back more than I give,” said Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Michael J. Riordan, who volunteers regularly with his family. “It is very gratifying, but it’s the interaction that is most meaningful and essential. They all have a story and they want people to hear it, so we listen. Then, as you’re listening, you realize you’re getting as much from them as you’re giving.”

Attorney Audrey Monaghan said she feels the same way.

“The most basic instinct for all of us is love,” she said. “That’s what we’re really giving them, and we’re getting just as much in return.”

Photo by Highway Media



PBJ attorney volunteers, left to right: Charley Hegarty, Bodman; Hon. Michael Riordan; Angela Hill (nonattorney); Brian Broderick, Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools; Audrey Monaghan, Monaghan Law Center; Keith Kesckes, Porritt Kesckes Silver & Gadd PC; Kevin Plagens, Kopka Pinkus Dolin & Eads PLC; and Bob Marzano, Plunkett Cooney.

### Well-Oiled Machine

PBJ opened its doors, so to speak, in October 2002.

“There were five of us, some jars of peanut butter and jelly, some loaves of bread, and a card table, and we fed 30 or 40 people,” Sullivan said. “But it didn’t take long before it started catching on. We soon had more volunteers and more people coming to us for help, and by Christmas that year we fed approximately 340 people a full Christmas dinner with all the trimmings.”

From there, Sullivan said, it snowballed.

“We added a clothing distribution twice a month, and one year went through somewhere in the range of 400–500 winter coats,” he recalled. “We now have two additional locations, all in the inner city of Detroit.”

The program begins every Saturday morning at 6 a.m. in the social hall of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Plymouth, where volunteers from all walks of life gather and open with a prayer.

In addition to the many lawyers and judges who show up every week, the program draws parishioners from OLG and

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other Christian churches, members of a Muslim university youth group, clergy, seminarians, high-school students, children, and other members of the community who have heard about the ministry and want to help.

It used to take many hours to prepare the food, drive downtown, and pass out the sandwiches. Now, Sullivan says, they have it down to a science.

By 6:15 a.m., folks are preparing food, sorting through clothes and books, and packing the dozens of cars and vans that will head downtown after receiving assignments and instructions.

By 7:30 a.m., the tables are set up downtown, the volunteers are in place, and several hundred hungry people take turns loading their bags with food, clothing, and books, all the while sharing their stories with the volunteers.

By 8:30 a.m., trunks are closed, tables are broken down, and the field is empty again.

But their bellies, and minds, are full.

"It's absolutely wonderful," Monaghan said. "It's a well-oiled machine, and it has to be. The line goes down the street and around the block, and nobody ever leaves hungry."

Sullivan said PBJ is now a staple of the homeless community.

"The people we serve have become very protective of us and are grateful for the regularity with which the PBJers show up every week, regardless of weather conditions," he said. "In those 10-plus years, not one Saturday has been missed."

"There isn't, and never has been, an attitude of, 'Oh, you poor unfortunate thing,'" Sullivan explained. "Everyone is treated with respect and there is a lot of personal interaction that goes on, celebrating birthdays, asking who needs help, and inquiring about families. True friends have been made and there has been quite a bridge built."

## Changing the World

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

That certainly rings true for PBJ, which has changed the world for so many.

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—Hon. Michael J. Riordan

In recognition of his ministry, the Federal Bar Association's Eastern District of Michigan Chapter recently presented Deacon Sullivan with its prestigious Wade H. McCree Jr. Award for the Advancement of Social Justice, which honors "individuals or organizations who have made significant contributions to the advancement of social justice."

As expected, Sullivan credited the volunteers.

"When I was told that the Federal Bar had honored me with the award, I can't tell you how delighted I was," he said. "It was recognition of all the work that the volunteers do week in and week out in order to touch the people of God in a very special way."

Judge Riordan said he was thrilled to see a small, grassroots effort like PBJ win the award.

"I really think the Federal Bar Association recognized the goodness and hope PBJ brings to the poorest among us," he said, noting that many members of the Bar from all over the state have volunteered, some on a weekly basis.

Monaghan said the ministry is a natural fit for lawyers.

"To whom much is given, much is expected," Monaghan said. "There's nothing like it. It is the ultimate opportunity to give back." Judge Riordan agreed.

"We're a helping profession, and this program helps at the most basic level," he said. "It puts us on the front lines and allows us to serve the weakest among us. That's what we're called to do, not just as lawyers, but as humans." ■

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