

Meals for needy a mission in Mokena

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Mission Meals volunteer Felicia Carmody, of Orland Hills, serves dinner to Glenn and Tammy Velasquez at EggCetera Cafe in downtown Mokena Thursday, January 24, 2013. |Brett Roseman~Sun-Times Media

With her face barely over the top of the table, a small girl took a bite of her cheeseburger and then gave a thumbs-up to family members seated with her at EggCetera Cafe in downtown Mokena. The other kids sipped soft drinks and quietly enjoyed chicken nuggets and fries while the adults ate wraps and Reuben's. In another corner, kids talked excitedly, while moms and grandmas visited, after they finished their dinner. On Thursday night, EggCetera Cafe — normally a breakfast and lunch spot — was filled with folks enjoying a free evening meal. Volunteers scurried to serve soft drinks and plates filled with sandwiches, fries, Cole slaw and pickles. The faces of the diners were those of typical families having fun while sharing a good meal. But they also were the faces of the hungry and needy. "The face of homelessness, the face of need, is not someone dirty, smelly or living under a bridge. They look just like us," said Tammy Leonard, who served Mission Meals for a year in her father's Golden Oak Restaurant. The free meal program is funded by One Love Global Wellness Foundation, which Leonard founded a few years ago to provide wellness in all aspects of life — body, mind and spirit. Her father, Don Cantelo, saw such faces looking for a bowl of soup in exchange for washing dishes at his restaurant. Another was living in her car with her two dogs and came to his restaurant looking for a job. He wasn't sure what to do, but he knew he couldn't say no. They might still have some clean clothes and drive a decent car, but these faces are those who just lost a job, are unemployed, underemployed and unable to pay the bills, he said. "We think it doesn't happen around here," Leonard said, "but it does. There are many 'working poor' in our area. It's one of the largest groups relying on food assistance programs." After the Golden Oak closed last year, Leonard sought to keep the program going. The Caesar's Foundation, of Joliet's Harrah's Casino, recently came through with a \$25,000 donation to Mission Meals. She then approached Dino Bastas at EggCetera Cafe about hosting the free dinners. "I thought, 'Sure, why not?' This place is idle at night," Bastas said. His staff manned the kitchen, while young volunteers from St. John's United Church of Christ in Mokena waited and bussed the tables. "This is really an awesome organization to donate my time to," volunteer Paige Schedin said. With a 10 percent unemployment rate in Will County and 7 percent living below the poverty level, Leonard knows that local food pantries have struggled to keep up with the demand, and other programs, such as Meals on Wheels, were cut back. She didn't want to duplicate services but help those who "fell through the cracks," she said. Funded by her One Love nonprofit foundation, Leonard and her dad created Mission Meals. After relocating in January to the EggCetera Cafe at 19709 Mokena St., it is accessible to the Metra commuter line. The plan is to offer free dinners on the third Thursday of the month, with a side dish of hope and inspiration. Leonard's mother, Janet Cantelo, offered free gifts to diners, inspirational books, and brochures on community resources to help them with housing, jobs and bills. "I provide information, inspiration and motivation," she said. "I want them to leave here feeling good." In the past, guest speakers offered job-seeking tips and coping strategies. Occasionally, Leonard has received donations of clothes, toys, books and gift cards to give away to diners. The project has served as many as 150 people in a given week, often getting referrals from local churches. There have been seniors who benefit from a nutritious meal and socialization, families who have not been able to afford a restaurant meal in years, and those who struggle with health and job issues and need a break from life's stresses. Leonard has worked for nonprofits for 20 years and owns and operates Grant Staff in downtown Mokena, to help other organizations obtain grants and raise needed funds. She has many community connections in her network and oftentimes is able to provide more than a meal. Occasionally, she has helped diners find shelter and a job. One Love Global Wellness was born out of her own effort to "get in shape," she said. She and a friend ran half-marathons and marathons and raised money for charities along the way. It's been her dream to have her own foundation and make an impact. In addition to Mission Meals, One Love has provided athletic shoes, bike helmets, wheelchairs and adaptive equipment to those in need. "I want to change the world, which can be done by helping change my neighborhood," Leonard said.

