



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

York Region Newspaper Group reporter Serena Willoughby helps prepare meals with Shirin Sumar at the homeless shelter at the Ja'fari Islamic Centre Wednesday evening.

Key to success at centre is teamwork, organizers says

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The guests consist of a core group of about 50 people who use the service and sleep on church basement floors and hallways all through the winter.

But spend a couple hours at Ja'fari and you start to feel less like a guest and more like one of the family.

Ms Sumar is the greeter who shows volunteers to the kitchen, where the ladies were busy preparing dinner with Ms Sumar's mother, who was like a general leading the food preparations.

"They've been here all afternoon," Ms Sumar says.

The ladies chat amiably as they prepare a dinner of salad, fried chicken, rice, french fries and fruit and custard for dessert.

They even made a sugar-free pie for two diabetic guests.

The elder Ms Sumar soon put this reporter to work in the kitchen as they tried to stretch the resources to facilitate the extra people.

"There are so many this week," she says.

Several of the volunteers are young women, mostly university students who started out volunteering during high school, as part of their mandatory community

service.

But a few years later, even with the demands of post-secondary education hanging over their heads, these girls keep coming back, week after week.

The women in the kitchen are like a family.

They could easily have been preparing food for their own children, considering the care they took in preparing the meal.

The guests are served by volunteers who bring the trays of food out, one by one.

After dinner, the younger girls take care of the "store", an area supplying clothes and supplies to the guests.

One by one, they all file through and pick out something from the store.

Someone has donated a box of new sunglasses and the guests sort through them trying on the different styles.

In honour of International Women's day, someone has sent roses for all the women in the program and the girls pass those out.

The Out of the Cold program supplies "security" to the host facilities, but as security guard Nancie tells me, he doesn't think of himself as security, more like one of the guys.

When there's a problem or a dis-

pute among the guests, Nancie might take the guest aside, have a cigarette with them and try to figure out how to solve it.

"It's more like conflict resolution," Nancie says with a laugh.

Nancie knows each of the guests and knows their history, while a lot of people might be intimidated by the guests, he knows it works both ways.

He got the nickname Nancie because, as a tall, tough-looking security guard, many of the guests found him intimidating.

He came up with his feminine sounding name as an icebreaker, since Nancie looks nothing like a "Nancie".

He's been taking care of security for the program for six years and he has seen a lot.

"A lot of organizations keep these guys (homeless) at arm's length, they serve them food, but they're too afraid to interact with them. But these guys (Ja'fari Islamic Centre) here, they're really cool."

Nancie points to one of the volunteers as he serves popcorn to the guests, who are now watching a movie.

"How often would you see a little old man serving popcorn to the homeless? But when they come here they're like family," he said.

What Nancie knows is that most of the guests are decent, kind people and they all have a story to tell.

Volunteering isn't just about chopping vegetables or washing dishes in the kitchen.

It's about showing the guests some hospitality by visiting with them and listening.

Take Anna, for instance.

She's a regular member of the core group, but have a chat with Anna and you'll find a woman with an education in psychology, a website and well-developed theories on everything from immigration to social work.

Anna has a futuristic concept of the social welfare system that would put George Orwell to shame.

While Anna may ruffle a few feathers from time to time, she's basically just disillusioned by a system she feels has failed her.

While she's appreciative of programs like Out of the Cold, she's frustrated by a system that hasn't allowed her to work in her field.

Talk to Whitehawk, he's been around Richmond Hill for years and can recount the history of the area from its very beginnings.

He's very well read, up-to-date on his current events and chatted about everything from Conrad Black to media to tattoos.

While the guests have no problem chatting, they're very firm on not giving out their names.

Nancie explains that many of them have family and they'd be ashamed if anyone found out they're now sleeping on a mosque basement floor.

He explains that part of his job is making sure the guests enjoy a level of anonymity that is absolutely necessary for making them feel at ease in the program.

When it was time to leave, some of the guests are getting ready to go to sleep on cushions in the hallways and mattresses on the linoleum floors. Ja'fari Islamic Centre is an old building, plagued by plumbing problems.

However, despite its rudimentary condition, the volunteers are eager to share it with their guests.

Even though this reporter felt all she did was sit around, talking to people, organizers were grateful for the help. Ms Sumar says that next week Members of Parliament Bryon Wilfert and Susan Kadis will be visiting the program.

"Sure hope they're ready to listen."

For more information about the Out of the Cold program or to volunteer contact Rehana Sumar, program coordinator at 416 948 6682 or e-mail her at rsumar@rogers.com

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