

*A resident boxes the Samaritan Inn truffles
photo by Chris Fritchie*



A Sweet Solution

By Kathryn MacDonell

WHEN TOLD that the poor had no bread to eat, it is said that Marie Antoinette responded: "Then let them eat cake." Although the heartless queen was being flippant, there is a group of caring people working with the homeless of Collin County who want to shout from the rooftops: "Let them eat chocolate!"

BUT WE'RE GETTING AHEAD OF OURSELVES.

The economy is shakier today than it's been since the Depression. Healthcare

costs are rising. It's especially difficult for those earning minimum wage to make ends meet. There's the threat of job loss and financial ruin, which can lead to substance abuse and broken families. Often, the end result is homelessness.

If you have no place to call home there is little choice but to move in with relatives or friends. Pretty soon the welcome mat wears out and you have nowhere to land. You lose confidence in yourself and the world at large.

But there's a sweet solution beyond

the sadness. It comes from the Samaritan Inn, a shelter that serves the homeless of Collin County. Lynne Sipiora, Executive Director of The Samaritan Inn, says, "Living in our affluent communities, we don't think there's a homeless problem and that's a big misconception." The Samaritan Inn was established in 1984 to help those in need regain their independence. It is still the only homeless shelter in Collin County.

Numbers Tell All – The Samaritan Inn has only 120 beds to serve the homeless among Collin County's 700,000 residents. Ms. Sipiora and others who serve at the shelter have the heart-breaking task of turning people away when there's literally no room at the Inn. Every night over 200 people sleep on the streets.

Vital Services – The Inn provides a safe, clean place to call home. There is no cost to the people who reside there. Its doors are open on an emergency, short-, or long-term basis. There are separate living areas for men, women and families. Playrooms and a playground are also available for children. Three meals are served each day and residents receive personal hygiene supplies, as well as clothing.

Resident Profile - In 2007, the Inn supported more than 634 people, of those, 120 were children. Currently, there are 32 school-aged children and four babies living at the shelter. One teenage mom came directly from the hospital with her newborn because she was no longer welcome in her family home.

The demographics are surprising, and certainly don't fit the stereotype of the homeless as lazy or addicted. The average homeless man is 25-45 years old, Caucasian and has a high-school diploma. The average homeless woman has the same profile, but with the addition of two children. The fastest growing group in the homeless population today is families.

Support Programs - Ms. Sipiora notes that clients don't have to worry about the multiple difficulties in their lives all at once. The Inn has five case workers who create individualized support plans to help clients become independent. Referrals to programs such as legal and financial counseling are offered, as well as mental and physical health services. Life-skill classes in parenting, budgeting and job training are also available. The average stay at the Inn is five months, but every case is different.

"The Samaritan Inn really gave me the chance to breathe," commented one client.

Dream Big - "If I could wish for anything, it would be for two additional wings to house 30 more beds," says Ms.

Sipiora. "I'd like us to be a one-stop shop for the disadvantaged, with full-time counselors on staff."

The challenge the Inn faces, however, is that only 6 percent of the budget comes from government sources. The remaining 94 percent must be raised from churches, service organizations, corporations and philanthropic individuals. But there's never enough and 70% of the budget is gone by the beginning of October. Summer is the most costly season with high air-conditioning bills. Ms. Sipiora, who keeps a close eye on the dollars says, "People are very generous to us at Christmas and we're grateful. But another Christmas in July would really be helpful."

Want to help? You're a good person and you recognize need in your community. But, your calendar is overflowing and you just can't squeeze in another minute. But do you have time for chocolate? Now wait a minute, how does indulging in pure pleasure equate with supporting your social conscience? Here's the most

innovative idea to cross your synapses in a long time.

Simple Beginnings - In 2006, with a goal of generating dollars and providing job training for residents, the staff at the Inn sat down to brainstorm. Their goal was to produce and sell a food product. It made sense to make use of



Charles Adair and George Crimm

And give back Toby does. He trains residents in the fine art of truffle making. It's a challenge when you have a revolving door of people entering the program from various walks of life and leaving when their lives become stable enough to move forward. The group dynamics are always changing, as is the training.

The residents learn important job skills as they participate in production, inventory, bookkeeping, customer service and sales.

"The Inn benefits economically and the program gives residents a chance to flourish both mentally and socially. There's a lot to be said about building esteem," muses Toby.

Personal Stories - The roads to homelessness are as varied as those who travel them. George, a mid-

50's resident, has suffered personal losses and struggles with depression. He understands the financial burden of running the Samaritan Inn.

"The Inn costs \$37 a day per person and the budget is \$1.7 million a year. The profits from the truffle sales help defray expenses. We get a sense of accomplishment in giving back for all that has been given to us," George says.

For some folks, learning the routine of waking up to be on time for work everyday is a new skill. For others, the program is a lifeline. Charles, 62, got divorced then was diagnosed with cancer. He couldn't work because he was struggling through five tumors and, eventually, skull surgery to have his scalp repositioned. "Learning a precision job like filling chocolates has given me pride. I'm glad I can contribute to society." Today, Charles is cancer free and hopes to be back "in the real world within six months."

Computer skills, teamwork and communication are all important parts of training in the truffle program. And, they

their industrial kitchen, which sat empty during the day while residents were at work or in programs. Everyone brought in favorite family recipes and enjoyed the taste tests, but once consumed, the recipes were discarded because the items were too perishable. Eventually, a moment of pure inspiration emerged.

They would create a product with universal appeal for all ages and cultures, a product that would elevate the Inn to a new level. Are you ready for it? The homeless residents would make truffles under the clever name "Greater Goodies." This innovative candy-making business would be run by the residents, and supervised by the staff. They would adhere to strict sanitary conditions. And so, the business was born under the banner of Samaritan Inn-dustries.

Giving Back - Toby Clark, Vocational Coordinator, heads up the program. His previous life was working as a chef for 12 years. "I burned out, feeding the over-privileged over-priced food. With this new venture, I'm giving back to society."

photo by Chris Fritchie



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look great on a resume. Ask 20 year-old Desiree, who just got a job. She's been in the program two months. "The program really works and the people are funny and nice," she giggles, excited for her future.

"Me and my little brother talked my dad into coming to the Samaritan Inn. We told him we couldn't keep sleeping in the car when he lost his job." Desiree and her dad are now saving for an apartment. Her brother continues to go to school so he can graduate.

Sweet Success - The candy-making business took off and the program received the Outstanding New Project Award at the 2006 Texas Homeless Network state convention.

"It feels great to be recognized," grins Molly Castillo, Development Manager. "The truffle business is so sweet. Our main goal is to teach independence and it works."

In 2007, "Greater Goodies" earned \$15,000 and has even brighter prospects for this year.

Toby Clark just can't say enough about the quality product he produces. "We've improved because we had input from a first-class chocolatier; an incredible man who is the "Willy Wonka" of Dallas. He worked with the residents to groom our truffles. He helped us improve their quality, enhanced the packaging and even took us on a tour of his facility."



labor intensive, but worth it because the truffles are so good they sell themselves. When the residents work at local shows selling truffles and they hear people raving, their confidence really grows. They feel a sense of accomplishment when people come back for seconds, and buy our truffles to support a good cause," Toby states proudly.

"Greater Goodies" is a seasonal business with Christmas and Valentine's Day as the busiest times, but they'd like to make it a year-round success. And that's where you come in. When you celebrate special occasions such as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries or any holiday, consider adding "Greater Goodies" truffles to the event. The rich, dark, delicious truffles come in boxes of two, 10, or a "Texas dozen"-- 15 truffles, complete with a yellow rose inside a state-shaped box. If you have someone special in your life, or you'd like to, sending a box for no reason at all is a really good idea.

"Greater Goodies" creates gifts of good

taste in colored boxes with customized labels. They'll even attach your corporate logo and deliver directly to customers in Collin County.

Give once by supporting the Samaritan Inn when you order truffles from "Greater Goodies." Give twice when you hand this delicious gift to your family, friends and colleagues. They'll be impressed and recognize you as a socially conscious member of the community. And, you'll feel great about giving because the Inn is a good return on your investment. More than 70 percent of residents had an income and housing when they left the Samaritan Inn last year.

Chocolate has magic. A mouthful has the power to transform an ordinary day into pure and simple pleasure. Although it only lasts for a few moments, the taste of giving a future to someone in need can last a lifetime.

Kathryn MacDonell is a freelance writer who lives in Dallas.

If you would like
to order truffles for your
family & friends contact:
Toby Clark at the
Samaritan Inn
214-592-2790

Hand-crafted – "Our truffles are made from all natural ingredients, and a sensational German imported chocolate called 'Schokinag.' We don't add any more sugar. And, we make them by hand. It's