

Amid Newbury's riches, safe haven

Day shelter offers meals and help finding services

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff |

The names of the grande dames of Newbury Street - Betsey Johnson, Kate Spade, Nanette Lepore - arch above doorways in neon letters and march along the sidewalks on crisp shopping bags. But there is another sisterhood on this glittering street, one that gathers in the unmarked basement of a puddingstone church.

At the Women's Lunch Place, which has been feeding women and offering them daytime shelter for 25 years, one of the best-known names is Brenda. She is the Brenda of "Chicken a la Brenda," the main course at lunch one day last week. She is also one of the success stories. She became homeless at 19, when her mother died, and spent 10 years on the streets.

"One day, I ended up here," said Brenda, who asked that her last name not be used. "I liked what I saw." Now 40, she has a place to live and she volunteers 40 hours a week at the shelter, cooking huge vats of food, including vegetarian options, for more than 100 women at lunch each day.

The daytime shelter will observe its 25th anniversary on Thursday, raising money for the organization with a dinner 60 stories above the city in the State Room. (One of the night's silent auction prizes: A personal meeting and photo op with former President Bill Clinton.)

As more women continue to stream into the basement of the Church of the Covenant at the corner of Berkeley, the shelter is outgrowing its space, and the group's new executive director, Sharon Reilly, hopes to expand. One day in August, the shelter set a record with 150 visitors.

"A lot of the women who come here are women who had normal lives," Reilly said. "Then you have a life event" - an illness, job loss, divorce - "and your life starts to spiral out of control."

Surveys have suggested that about half the women who go to the Women's Lunch Place have some college education. The vast majority have been physically or sexually abused. Many of the women struggle with mental illness, often untreated.

Women who find themselves in tough times have gathered to eat breakfast and lunch, to nap, to use the phone - and now, the Internet - and to wash their clothes. Doctors treat their medical needs, and advocates help them with housing and services. Only 1 percent of the organization's \$1.8 million annual budget is derived from government sources. The shelter relies heavily on volunteer labor and individual and corporate donations.

Not everyone who visits is homeless. A woman who gives only her first name, Maria, started spending time at the shelter last year, when a hip injury kept her from her job as a medical technician. She began showing up at the Women's Lunch Place three times a week and credits the women she met there with keeping her sane. "I was going through a lot of stress," she said. She still stops in. One morning last week, she was sitting at a table of friends after her overnight hospital shift.

At another table nearby sat an older Kenyan woman the workers call "Grandma." She has stayed in several of the city's homeless shelters, but has difficulty walking and has no place to go during the day, when the other shelters close. She comes to the Women's Lunch Place to eat and shower.

"If you want to be clean in this place," she said, "you can be clean."

More information may be obtained at womenslunchplace.org or 617-267-1722.

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