

With dental drills, Mercy Care clinic extends healing, compassion



BY ANDREW NELSON

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ATLANTA—Outside the doors of the Mercy Care clinic, within view of the towers of downtown, patients wait, hoping to get a coveted walk-in slot in the dental clinic.

For those who work at the clinic on Decatur Street, their work goes beyond pulling teeth and filling cavities. It is about lifting people up whom others mistreat or overlook.

“It is part of the healing process of getting their lives back in order,” said Dr. Rochelle Butler, the lead dentist, her braids pulled back and her face behind a plastic shield as she works.

In an effort to increase access to oral health care, Mercy Care is one of eight Georgia health centers to share nearly \$3 million awarded by the agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concerned with the medically uninsured, isolated or vulnerable.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Mercy Care’s current headquarters and clinic on Decatur Street in Atlanta was built in 2001.

The \$525,000 grant for Mercy Care, announced June 16, will help the agency to expand to serve adults and children in crisis. The funding may help reduce the two-month waiting list for an appointment with a dentist. There were some 7,435 patient visits in 2015 to see four full-time Mercy Care dentists.

Once an offshoot of Saint Joseph’s Hospital, Atlanta, the nonprofit now stands on its own since the hospital became part of Emory Healthcare in 2012. Mercy Care began as an extension of the ministry of the Sisters of Mercy, who founded Saint Joseph’s Hospital in the 1880s. In 1985 Mercy Care

incorporated as a nonprofit and in 2001 built its headquarters and clinic on Decatur Street, opposite the Martin Luther King MARTA station. Its services are extensive, from primary care to mental health care, including sending mobile care clinics to shelters and church halls where the homeless congregate.

Dentist asks, “Is Jesus pleased?”

It began offering dental services in the mid-1980s and expanded about 10 years ago to include women, men and children without shelter, folks without insurance and other patients. Today about a third of its patients have been diagnosed with HIV. The dental service is unique in the community, offering cleaning, filling, X-rays,



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Dr. Katrina Schuler-Bacon, a native of Flint, Mich., and a graduate of Meharry School of Dentistry, Nashville, Tenn., had her own private practice for a number of years before coming to work at Mercy Care a year ago. The clinic can see up to 12-14 patients a day.

extractions and evaluations. Butler could think of only two other Atlanta area agencies doing dental care dedicated to serving men and women without the ability to pay.

Butler, who is 50, marks a decade at Mercy Care in July. A New Orleans native, she thought about a career in medicine and studied at Xavier University of Louisiana. An unplanned encounter with Dr. David Satcher, the future U.S. Surgeon General, led her to Meharry Medical College’s dental school in Nashville, Tennessee. After practicing in California and Georgia, she started at the Mercy Care clinic.

“I wasn’t feeling fulfilled in what I was doing. I’ve been here since. I love it. I feel like it is my calling in life. It is what I was created to do,” she said. “It goes beyond dentistry. With our patients, you have people who are used to being mistreated. What we are doing here is what Jesus told us to do.”

Butler said she judges the work by asking, “Is Jesus pleased with what we are doing here?”

Most of the services are pulling teeth that cannot be saved. She understands that for those coming to this clinic a dental visit can be a lower priority, competing with immediate needs, like keeping a roof over your head and eating.

“Most people come because they are in pain. The teeth are usually too far gone. Patients don’t come until the last minute,” Butler said. “I do understand their fear. I’m going to treat them like my mom and dad. Number one, Jesus Christ told us to.”

care access to overall good health. Dental care can identify serious health problems before they appear in other parts of the body. Poor dental coverage is a barrier to oral health care for low-income adults. Compared to people with high incomes, the poor are 40 percent less likely to have visited the dentist in the past 12 months, reported the Kaiser Family Foundation’s Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. And the U.S. Public Health Service reported dental disease puts people at higher risk for diabetes, heart disease and stroke, in addition to reduced employment.

Lawrence Whitefield, 46, has been visiting the clinic for a year. Before that he guesses he went about three years without a dentist appointment.

“Nobody wants to go to the dentist. You go to the dentist at the last part,” he said.

But his doctor, also at Mercy Care, prodded him to see one, said Whitefield, with a salt and pepper beard and two earrings in one ear. He got a cleaning and some cavities were treated.

“Either you are going to the dentist or you are going to be miserable,” he said. Whitefield said he has since encouraged a friend to get services at Mercy Care because of the staff’s compassion.

The federal grant from the Health Resources & Services Administration will help the agency expand. The plan is to enlarge the dental program at Mercy Care at Gateway Center, on Pryor Street in downtown Atlanta, and services for adults and children at Mercy Care at City of Refuge, on Joseph E.

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Amen.

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Poor often forego dental care
Medical studies link dental

"It goes beyond dentistry. With our patients, you have people who are used to being mistreated. What we are doing here is what Jesus told us to do."

Dr. Rochelle Butler

Boone Blvd. Mercy Care is seeing a growing number of immigrant patients at its Chamblee clinic, so the nonprofit hopes to hire a bilingual dentist who speaks Spanish.

95 percent of funding from grants, donors

The downtown clinic has six dental work areas, with the whine of dental drills filling the office. Staff members wearing light blue scrubs hover over patients with mouths wide open and their feet up. There are two dental hygienists and six dental assistants on staff. Patients are seen five days a week, both walk-ins and those with appointments. Dentists see as many as 14 patients a day.

The program costs about \$1.5 million with only about 5 percent coming from paying patients and insurance reimbursements. Grants cover close to 60 percent of costs. More than \$570,000 has to be raised from individual donors, corporations and foundations to cover the remaining dental program expenses, according to Mercy Care.

Dr. Katrina Schuler-Bacon has worked in the dental field for about 20 years, including in her own



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

With the help of dental assistant Vickie Francis, left, Dr. Rochelle Butler, a native of New Orleans, and a graduate of Meharry School of Dentistry, Nashville, Tenn., performs a tooth extraction on a patient one morning. Butler, one of two dentists on staff at the Mercy Care Decatur Street clinic, has been with the nonprofit for 10 years. In addition to extractions they also perform routine cleanings and fillings.

practice. She's been at Mercy Care for a year.

She views the work as providing understanding and compassion.

"God had me in the field for reason. I can use my hand for helping," she said. "We can give them medication, take away pain, give them hope. This blesses me."

Cynthia Pickard, a dental hy-

gienist and one of the agency's longest serving staff members, marked 10 years with Mercy Care last January. She wiped and sterilized equipment as she waited for her next patient. A clipped magazine cartoon hangs in her office. In it, a woman talks to a priest outside a confessional booth. The punchline

is ".... and I lied about flossing."

Pickard said some patients come to her covering their mouths, ashamed of being judged because of bad breath, or won't shake hands out of fear of rejection.

"I'm not afraid. We can hug," she said.

"This is kind of a way to do mis-

sion work here in Atlanta," Pickard said.

"The Lord calls you to serve and there are many areas to serve."

For information about Mercy Care, its locations and services, visit mercyatlanta.org.

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Two women find friendship is their common language



BY NICHOLE GOLDEN

ngolden@georgiabulletin.org

CLARKSTON—Fatma, a Syrian refugee and mother of five children, loves treating her friend Susan Scollo to steaming cups of tea and coffee flavored with cinnamon, and homemade chocolate and coconut desserts.

Scollo, a volunteer with Catholic Charities Atlanta's Refugee Resettlement Services, visits Fatma weekly to help with errands or sort through documents.

After violence forced them to leave Syria, Fatma and her husband Mohammed spent more than a year living in a refugee camp in Lebanon. Their names have been altered to protect family members still in Syria.

Before 2011, when the clash began between Syrian military and opposition forces that escalated into a full-scale civil war, the family enjoyed a nice life in Homs, Syria. They were building a home, and Mohammed had a good job at a dairy. But the

ancient city has been devastated and destroyed. The family car was struck by a missile. They eventually decided to flee. With the help of Fatma's brother, the family escaped to Lebanon.

Catholic Charities Atlanta resettled the family, moving them to an apartment in Clarkston. The DeKalb County community has opened its arms to refugees from across the globe.

A parishioner of Transfiguration Church in Marietta, Scollo learned about the organization's Family Friend program through her husband's involvement with a Catholic Charities Leadership Class.

"I just prayed about it," said Scollo. "Is this the right thing for me? There's so many people with different gifts."

She has been a Family Friend volunteer for more than three and a half years.

The Family Friend program matches volunteers with recently arrived refugee families. The friends commit to working with their assigned family for two hours per week for the first four months they are in the country.

A new friend, a new name

On the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in January 2016, Pope Francis used the observance to remind the world that "welcoming the stranger" is a corporal work of mercy.

"Family Friends are, first and



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

During a stop by the Catholic Charities Northlake office, Atlanta, refugee resettlement volunteer Susan Scollo, bottom right, watches Fatma, a Syrian mother, browse through some children's apparel, as two of her children show more interest in the toys and the youngest sleeps in her baby carrier.

foremost, a welcoming face amongst the uncertainty and fear that comes with moving to a new place where everything is unfamiliar and you may not even speak the language," said Kimberly Longshore, refugee resource coordinator for Catholic Charities Atlanta. "They help families learn things like how to check the mail, how to do their laundry, and work their thermostat. They also allow them the opportunity to practice their

English."

Scollo has worked with two Burmese families. This is her first time working with a Syrian family. From the start, she and Fatma had an instant connection.

When Scollo first visited and introduced herself, she explained that "Sue" was a nickname. Fatma had her own plan and decided to call her new acquaintance Susan.

"That's a better name," Fatma

told her.

"One of the first things I usually bring to a family when I go is a picture English dictionary," said Scollo. "It truly helps with learning parts of the house, food names, places around a city, and other helpful words such as words used at a doctor's appointment."

After living in Georgia for more than a year, Fatma speaks English well. She had studied translation for a brief time with a British instructor at college.

"She didn't know at the time how important that would be," said Scollo.

Scollo knows very little Arabic. "The only word I really know

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TO HELP

Here are some ways to help in the Catholic Charities Atlanta refugee resettlement effort:

- Refugee Youth Mentoring Program is a long-term program that matches mentors with refugee youth between the ages of 12 and 17.
- Academic Mentoring Program provides afterschool help to refugee students during the school year.

■ Strong Backs for Refugees is a group that helps move in furniture and set up apartments for arriving families or picks up donated furniture and household items. Shoppers help purchase household items and groceries.

■ Volunteer to be a Family Friend.

Contact: Kimberly Longshore at 678-222-3964 or klongshore@catholiccharitiesatlanta.org

is lollipop," she joked.

Fatma's three youngest children, ages 1 to 5, play nearby. The oldest two girls attend the International Community School in Decatur.

"All my children love Susan," said Fatma.

Fatma's 3-year-old daughter, Farh, plays with a cell phone and giggles as she shows Scollo pictures.

"I had an old iPad and I brought it over," said Scollo.

Farh and Scollo have their own way of communicating.

One day, she realized that Farh was telling her not to remove the car seat from her vehicle because they had plans to go back out.

"I know her so well. I know what she's trying to tell me. I speak 'Farh'," said Scollo.

"She is my sister"

Fatma's husband works daily in Tucker, and she has no driver's license. Scollo helps by taking her to the market or to doctor's

appointments.

She has become familiar with all the grocery stores and farmer's markets in metro Atlanta that offer ethnic foods, and learned a lot about Syrian cuisine along the way.

Some of the refugee families' needs are more basic. Scollo recalls one woman who had never seen a doorknob and didn't know how to turn it.

"It really varies from family to family," she said.

Scollo spends a lot of hours driving from her Marietta home to serve families, but minimizes the travel, saying she is fortunate to have the time to do it.

"It's such a blessing to me. They become part of my family," she added.

Scollo said she keeps in mind the words of St. Therese to "do small things with great love."

To Fatma, Scollo's efforts are not small.

"I wish every refugee family in America had a 'Susan',"



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Fatma, foreground right, a Syrian mother who came to the United States with her husband and five children in January 2015, ponders what type of meat to purchase at a Clarkston grocer as her children (front to back), Farh and Ahmad and Catholic Charities resettlement volunteer Susan Scollo look through the chicken.

said Fatma. "She is my sister in America."

Fatma, who is a Muslim, always has a special farewell for Scollo when she departs. "God bless you and God bless your family," she tells her.

Although she likes America, Fatma misses her family in Syria and hopes her husband's family in Lebanon will be able to join them at some point.

Refugee, Page 16

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REFUGEE PROCESS

- Refugees are people living outside their home country who cannot return because of a well-founded fear of persecution. To seek asylum they must register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and request third country resettlement.
- Those who ask for asylum in the United States are referred to the U.S. State Department and undergo security and other clearance. If approved, their case is forwarded to approved resettlement agencies. The process typically takes 18 to 24 months.
- Catholic Charities Atlanta receives refugees through the Office of Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Refugees receive Medicaid benefits for eight months but have to pay back travel costs within 42 months. Adults are work authorized upon arrival.
- On average, 94 percent of refugee families resettled by Catholic Charities Atlanta become economically self-sufficient within six months of arrival in the United States.
- Less than 1 percent of the world's refugees are resettled into another country each year.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Catholic Charities resettlement volunteer Susan Scollo, sitting left, provides some help as she goes through the incoming mail with Fatma. Scollo, a member of Transfiguration Church, Marietta, has worked with the Syrian family for some 14 months. She also works with two other families from Burma.

REFUGEE

From Page 15

"I had to go," she explained. "My children are safe." Although they have no family here, they have received assistance from Syrian-Americans in Atlanta. "The American Syrian community has been very supportive of the refugees," said Scollo. They donated a washing machine and a new car, just like the one destroyed in Syria. "God ... he knows everything," said Fatma. Scollo is regularly treated to

tea-party-like lunches, including a chicken and onion filling baked into a ground wheat pie. Hospitality and giving to others is something Fatma learned from her parents. "Fatma ... she just amazes me," said Scollo.

"It's a true friendship"

One day, Scollo arrived to see one less couch in the living room and questioned the young mother. "My neighbor didn't have one, and I gave it to them," was Fatma's response. The family gives back by visiting other Syrian refugee families. "They go and meet all the

different families. She cooks and brings them the food they are used to," said Scollo. This summer, Scollo has planned fun trips to the zoo, aquarium and other sites in Atlanta for the children. "We have a lot of fun together," she said. "It's just so much joy." Scollo also works to help Catholic Charities set up apartments for refugee families with donated furniture, household items such as linens, and a week's worth of groceries.

"One year we did a Christmas party and we just asked them to bring bedding," said Scollo. But it's the work of being a friend that Scollo enjoys the most, and she often finds it difficult when a family starts to move on. "It's a true friendship," she said. Although her four-month official commitment to Fatma's family as a volunteer has lapsed, Scollo continues to extend a helping hand in friendship.

Each of the families befriended by Scollo has had babies born since arriving in America. She is helping Fatma plan for the future by making plans to begin studying for her U.S. citizenship test. "The rewards are so great to see families become part of our American society," said Scollo. Longshore said she could tell Scollo was a good fit for the Family Friend program from the beginning because of her compassion. When a Catholic Charities family has a challenge, the staff often turns to Scollo. "Sue has just been one of the most generous and helpful volunteers we've ever worked with and she does it all with such humility," said Longshore. "She does it because she truly loves working with refugees and she expects nothing in return."



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THE NEWSPAPER OF THE CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ATLANTA

2 schools earn Blue Ribbon status ... again

BY NICHOLE GOLDEN
ngolden@georgiabulletin.org

ATLANTA—It's all things blue for archdiocesan elementary schools St. Joseph in Marietta and St. Thomas More in Decatur.

On Sept. 28, U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. named both schools as 2016 National Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence.

Each serving students in kindergarten through eighth grade, the Catholic schools are among 279 public and 50 private schools nationally to receive the honor.

In a video message, King praised the winners.

"As a former social studies teacher and a school administrator, I understand the tough choices you have to make. It takes courage to do the right thing for children, even in the face of significant obstacles. All of you—students, teachers and administrators—deserve our highest praise," he said. "You are shining examples for your communities, your state, and the nation."

Schools may apply for Blue Ribbon status as "exemplary high performing"—among the top schools in a state—or "exemplary achievement gap closing"—schools making the fastest progress in their state in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups.

St. Joseph and St. Thomas More were selected as exemplary high performing schools. It is the second Blue Ribbon award for both schools. St. Joseph earned the honor in 2003 and St. Thomas More in 1988.

The Council for American Private Education nominates non-public schools, including parochial and independent schools for the Blue Ribbon award. To be eligible to be nominated, the school must have scored in the top 15 percent on a

Schools, Page 18

MERCY IN ACTION



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

Johanna Baldwin of St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Smyrna, pours soup into cups with assistance from fellow parishioner Joyce Piatt. The soup of chicken, refried beans and rice is a donation from the Los Bravos Mexican Restaurant in Smyrna.

Once a week the people don't have to worry about hunger

BY ANDREW NELSON
anelson@georgiabulletin.org

ATLANTA—Johanna Baldwin scooped the ladle deep into the generous pot of soup sitting in her car

trunk, pulling up vegetables, pork and chicken. Waiting men and women cradled the cup of soup, accepting a bag of yellow rice and bread to go with it.

The parishioner of St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Smyrna, greeted people with a hug. "Hand them a bag of food or water, it is transformative for them and you. What they appreciate most is the gift of our time. The fact we pay attention to

them and look them in the eye," said Baldwin, who is 54, one of the long-timers who spend their Saturdays in this northwest Atlanta corner of auto body shops, abandoned gas stations

Hunger, Page 2

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INSIDE

Remembering a beloved baby, thanking God: Profound reasons motivate people to give **PAGE 12**

Cristo Rey Atlanta High School moving to larger site in 2017 **PAGE 14**



Atlantan among sisters sent to Ireland to evangelize **PAGE 24**

INDEX

Archbishop's Column.....	5
Viewpoints.....	6
Faith/Life.....	8
Puzzles.....	32
Kids' Chronicle.....	33
CNS News Briefs.....	35
Bulletin Notes.....	36
Classifieds.....	38

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

The volunteers make their second of three stops at a vacant gas station at the corner of Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway and Yates Drive, NW. The distribution of food is only part of the JustFaith Feed the Hungry ministry. Since it's been around five and a half years, many of the volunteers have formed a bond and friendship with the people on the street. They greet each other and converse until it's time to move on to the next stop.

HUNGER

From Page 1

and boarded-up storefronts.

These ministers of mercy are a regular presence on Hollowell Parkway, delivering to women, men and families their daily bread. Faith-filled volunteers for the past five years have looked for

people who are hungry in one of Atlanta's most impoverished neighborhoods. The ministry is year round on every Saturday. The servers are undaunted by summer's heat or the winter cold.

Pope Francis designated December 2015 through this November as the Year of Mercy. Believers are encouraged to be merciful, through prayer and practices of extending a hand to others. Even when the year closes, Catholics

and members of other churches and faiths will continue to be here.

Joe Powell, who worships at Buckhead Church, said, "I'm doing well in my life. You do 40 hours a week at work, you should do at least four hours of community service."

Guided by Matthew 25

Frank Madden, a member of St. Thomas the Apostle, was inspired to start the outreach after a fellow participant in a JustFaith class told him how her family would go to the poor in their village in India. JustFaith is a faith formation

program focused on "expanding and promoting social ministry." The idea wasn't too unusual for Madden, who at one time was a volunteer soup maker for Atlanta's Open Door Community before he started this ministry.

He learned of people living under the bridge where Hollowell Parkway goes over Interstate 285. That determined where the ministry would focus its effort.

"We use Matthew 25: 31-40 as a guide," he said. The Gospel passage recounts how Jesus told people when they serve "the least of these" men, women and children on the margins of society, they serve him.

The work hasn't veered from its original vision: Serve people with food. He hopes other small groups will take up the same mission. The bulk of the food is donated by volunteers, many from the Catholic parishes of St. Thomas the Apostle or St. Paul of the Cross, Atlanta, but also people of different faiths and churches, he said.

"They are my friends"

On Saturdays, the small convoy of cars makes three stops, driving past abandoned storefronts. Around this neighborhood, close to half of the people live below the poverty line. Some 69 percent of children under 18 live in poverty, according to the census.

Pauline Bullard-Moore is 70

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After the vehicles have been loaded and before the volunteers take to the street Aug. 27 to disseminate food to the hungry, the last order of business is a group prayer.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

In an assembly line fashion, Sept. 24, JustFaith Feed the Hungry volunteers fill bags with water and an assortment of food items. On the fourth Saturday of each month the Knights of Peter Claver Women's Auxiliary 301 joins a host of others by providing chips, eggs, sandwiches and water.

TO CONNECT

■ To learn more or volunteer, follow the Feed the Hungry Facebook group at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/565387216941763/>

and retired from the corporate world. Her hair is salt and pepper and there is a crucifix around her neck. She worships at St. Thomas the Apostle too. This warm Saturday, as the heat made her yellow shirt stick to her back, she eyed a pair of pants to see if they would fit the overweight man standing in front of her.

"I'll make them work," he said.

It is in the mid-80s and the humidity makes it uncomfortable. Children and adults alike suck on frozen flavored popsicles.

Bullard-Moore grew up watching parents share produce from their south Georgia family farm with neighbors. She became a Catholic as an adult. One of her introductions to the faith was serving at a soup kitchen. Said Bullard-Moore, "It's not a struggle for me. It's a commitment I made."

It is unacceptable to her for people to go without food. She tries to persuade people she meets to take up feeding the hungry by donating money or making sandwiches. "Once people come out, it is so rewarding. Whatever ails me, I know I will feel better" by serving on Saturday, she said.

Bullard-Moore described helping a military veteran who lived under the bridge. After gaining his trust, she accompanied him to get military ID to check on his veteran benefits. He had no identification except for arrest record docu-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

The final stop, in a parking lot just off Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, on James Jackson Parkway, NW, usually draws the largest number of people needing food and clothing.

ments. With Bullard-Moore by his side and help from understanding government workers, his military record was found and he was able to access services. Today he lives in Virginia close to family, she said.

Folks served by the volunteers thank them. A woman said the food helps her stretch her food budget. One man said the group's

friendliness makes them fun.

"They are taking care of business. Even in the rain they come," said Priscilla Cammon, as she carried the bag lunch away. "They are my friends."

For one day, no worries about food

People get a day's meal from the outreach. Inside a plastic grocery

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bag there are two sandwiches, fruit, chips, pastry and two boiled eggs. Folks also can get soup and reach into a large basket of bread donated by an Atlanta Bread Company store. The pastries are from Dough in the Box. The ingredients for the soup come from a Los Bravos Mexican restaurant.

Kiana Wright, 38, a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Atlanta, grew up in New Orleans where she was shaped by her experience at the Ursuline Academy, with its motto of "Serviam" ("I will serve").

Said Wright, who works as a forensic psychologist, "It meets the needs of the people. It's one day they don't have to worry about eating. We have such a great relationship with the people we serve. Now, we're like family."

Some people seeking help arrive in cars, others walk from the neighborhood, like one teen. On her birthday, the girl and the bags of donated clothes she received went in Wright's back seat as she drove the teen home.

Close to 70 people have been helped this Saturday. Baldwin finished the soup as the number of women and men dwindled. When the ladling was done, she insisted an ill woman walking with the aid of a cane let Baldwin drive her home.

For Baldwin, who works in the telecommunications industry, the ministry is "about treating people with dignity, no matter their station in life. I think this is a Mother Teresa misquote, but we do what we can with what we have. It takes so little to make someone smile."

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