

Brunch Update

Issue 88 - November 2016
Sufi Service Committee of Boston

Addressing the most pressing needs of our community



Bobby organizes the clothes donation.

Happenings

Every Sunday in October, a festive atmosphere welcomed volunteers who helped sort out donated clothing at Noor Oriental Runs.

We were particularly happy to see some new faces - for example, Carrie and her daughters Andrea and Daphne.

Volunteer joyfully sort the 'raw material' into children's, women's, and men's clothing by 'tops' and 'botttoms'. Shoes are securely fastened together with rubber bands to keep them from separating. We also separate out 'professional' clothing, i.e., items that would be useful for a job interview.

After the morning sorting of clothes at Noor on October 23rd, three of us went to the corner of Mass. Ave. and Albany Street in the South End to distribute free clothing.

Items were distributed to about a dozen people, who were most appreciative of our effort. It was nice to have some direct contact with the folks we were assisting. Since we'll be running into different people from week to week, there may not be quite the same opportunity to develop friendships as with our food service. On the other hand, the need of the folks on Mass. Ave. is probably more pressing than that of those in subsidized housing.

We had a chance to converse a bit with one of the locals; he mentioned that he's been doing some writing of late, and we suggested that he submit something to Spare Change News for publication. His eyes lit up at the suggestion, so perhaps we've helped launch the career of a budding author. He also mentioned that he's been suffering from ulcers on his legs due to a vascular condition. (Author's note: As someone who dutifully tries to remember my daily medications, I can only imagine the difficulty of following a medical regimen in the absence of permanent housing.)

In the future, we may set up at a consistent time and place every week so folks can find us. Perhaps it will make sense to try a few different locations for now, though, so we can determine the ideal location.



Michael mesmerizing us saxaphonically.

"Thank you for inviting us to the event. We both found the talks fascinating, especially the idea of preventing homelessness by providing food, clothing, and auto repair. It was encouraging to learn about the work in this direction undertaken by the cities of Somerville and Cambridge."



-Steve and Beverly Kleiman



Sisia is another Sufi Service Committee volunteer.



St. Francis House picked up the donated clothing.

Mark Alston-Follansbee

Mark started talking to homeless people when he moved to Cambridge in 1985; something about them felt familiar. He got upset when he learned that many of them were veterans, mostly from Vietnam. He had been kicked out of college in 1966 and immediately drafted. He knew that the only reason he wasn't on the street too was because of the support he had from family and friends when he came back from Vietnam in 1968, even if he did lose many years of my life from the trauma he experienced.



Mark started as a volunteer with the Cambridge Department of Human Services in 1986 and was one of the first people hired to open the Cambridge Multi-Service Center for the Homeless in 1987. He started as the receptionist and was soon running programs at the YM and YWCAs.

In 1988 Mark left the City to work for Shelter, Inc., now called Heading Home. He was the case manager for the Cambridge shelter and then program director. In 2000 he became the executive director of the Somerville Homeless Coalition.

Remarks for the Sufi Service Committee, 9/16/2016

Thank you to Mo and to the Sufi Service Committee for inviting me to be with you today. Thank you for all the good work you do in our community and for the support you give to the Somerville Homeless Coalition.

I'd like to especially recognize our friend Bill Bumpus who is a Sufi Service volunteer and has made hundreds of pickups and deliveries to the Somerville Homeless Coalition for many years. Thank you Bill.

We are fortunate to be here in Cambridge and Somerville where people -- and government -- care about the poor. Poverty is a political issue and unfortunately, especially at the federal level, our country's current policies are making life harder, not better, for many people.

We are in an emergency regarding hunger and the homeless, and we have to address these emergency needs. Programs like this and our work in Somerville are necessary and important -- but it's important to also remember to educate our fellow citizens and work to change the policies in our country. Food and shelter are basic human needs and, in my opinion, basic human rights. How long can we call something an emergency before we address the root causes and solve these problems? And they are solvable.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about the Somerville Homeless Coalition. We started in 1985 when people started to notice homeless people congregating in Davis Square. There were no shelters in Somerville so if you were homeless you'd have to go into Cambridge or Boston for shelter.

People got together and a Methodist church on College Avenue agreed to turn part of their basement into a shelter for individuals. It opened in February of 1986 and I know no one expected we would still be there 30 years later -- but homelessness is worse now than it was then.

The group quickly realized there was a need for a family shelter too and got another church, this one in east Somerville, to give the Coalition space in their building. We've had 20 beds for five families there since 1987.

Project SOUP started in 1969 and offered the first free, community meal program in New England. They were a part of another local agency but they asked to join us in 1996. The Homeless Coalition board wisely said yes; these issues of hunger and homelessness and intertwined with people living in poverty. SOUP runs the largest food pantries in Somerville and one of our goals -- because we know how people are struggling with food security -- is to give everyone fresh produce along with bags of non-perishables.

In 1997 we received our first federal grant to provide case management to everyone homeless in Somerville with a goal to get them back into permanent housing. That's hard because the folks we work with often have criminal records, bad credit, and bad landlord histories; these barriers, along with a lack of affordable housing, make it difficult to get out of homelessness.

In 2001 we opened our first permanent housing program -- no one was able to provide enough housing for our clients so we do what we can ourselves. We don't own any property but we use federal funds to rent apartments. Many are from non-profit developers but we also rent market-rate apartments.



Vice-Mayor Marc McGovern and Mark Alston-Follansbee share a moment after their respective talks.

Since 2007 we have focused our efforts on preventing people from becoming homeless. For short money, it averages a little over \$1,000.00, we can keep people housed. We know it's a band aid because they still live in poverty -- but if they fall into homelessness it is very difficult to find affordable housing and the human cost, especially on the children, is staggering.

Last year we worked with over 2,100 people in 999 households, including 665 children. We prevented over 300 people, families and individuals, from becoming homeless. We support 162 people in permanent housing. Over 1,200 people used our food pantries.

What started out as a group of volunteers with an idea is now a \$3M agency with 35 staff people and hundreds of volunteers every year. But our motto is Working to Put Ourselves Out of Business since 1985.

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon in our country. There were homeless people during colonial times. During the industrial revolution there were scores of children living in the streets and camping in police stations. We've all seen the photographs of the bread lines during the Great Depression.

My hope is that we will not institutionalize shelters as an acceptable form of housing for poor people. There is no reason the wealthiest country the world has ever seen has over 20% of our children food insecure.

We can eliminate these problems -- we have the experience and the skill, but we lack the resources. Even though we are in the enlightened city of Cambridge in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, neither of these governments have the resources to help us solve hunger and homelessness.

The federal government does have the resources, but it puts our money in other places, like wars and the defense department. It has cut over 40 billion dollars from housing supports to poor people, beginning in 1972. Under both Democratic and Republican administrations. The changes I want to see have our government helping those who can't help themselves, including the elderly, the disabled, and children. Those are the people we work with because no one else will.

Thank you for coming today to support the Sufi Service Committee. I urge everyone to support this work or any other charity that you feel connected to. And I'd like to leave you with two thoughts that make sense to me:

"If we do not hang together, we shall surely hang separately."

- Benjamin Franklin

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

- Margaret Mead

Thank you and please stay connected, stay involved.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED



Victoria is in a cheerful mood at Noor

Volunteers of all background are welcome to get involved by:

- Preparing and serving meals
- Donating and organizing clothes
- Providing administrative assistance
- Making financial contributions

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