

Souper Contact

by Jessica Anschutz, Bonner Scholars Coordinator and Billy Newton, Rhodes Chaplain.

Purpose

- Provides students with an opportunity to develop lasting relationships and build a sense of community by serving nutritious hot meals needed by the hungry and homeless in Memphis.
- Teaches students to interact with people different from themselves, to stretch money to maximize the benefit to others, to understand issues of hunger and homelessness, and to build relationships with persons who are poor and marginalized in society.

Background

In the late 1980s, a group of students attended the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness Conference. When they returned to Memphis, they assessed the needs of the city and learned that there was no free meal available for the hungry on Tuesday evenings. The students asked St. John's United Methodist Church if they could use their facility to prepare and serve a meal once a week. The students were denied at first, but they were persistent and the church eventually agreed to the arrangement.

How It Works

Job Descriptions

Project coordinators recruit and coordinate volunteers and buyers and maintain the organization's constitution and budget. They are responsible for submitting an itemized budget to the Rhodes student allocations fund to receive funding.

Buyers go shopping on Tuesday afternoons at a local grocery store. They have a budget of \$100 each week to purchase enough food to feed 80 to 100 guests. Typical purchases include ground beef, crackers or bread, cookies, canned fruit and vegetables, pasta, and fresh salads. Rhodes food services, local markets and churches occasionally donate food as well.

Preparing and Serving Food

Buyers and volunteers arrive on site at 4 p.m. and begin preparing the meal and visiting with the guests. Once the food is ready, plates are served to the guests at their tables, restaurant-style. Volunteers are assigned to serve specific tables to ensure that everyone is given one plate at a time. Volunteers then return to the kitchen to prepare a second helping for each guest. Seconds are delivered in the same manner. Volunteers then clean up the kitchen and the dining area before locking the church.

Bonner Scholar Participation

Bonniers have served as dedicated volunteers during the academic year and have sustained the program during the summer. Bonner summer interns serve as buyers and coordinators May through August.

Training is offered on site and through the Rhodes Kinney Program's Service-Training Series (KINNEY S-T). At the Kinney S-T for Hunger and Homelessness, participants learn how to respectfully interact with persons who are homeless. Tips are given for conversation topics and how to approach guests who may seem intimidating at first glance. This training is often provided by current or formerly homeless individuals.

Reflection

Volunteers reflect on their experiences in the kitchen while carpooling to and from the site. Many students reflect informally with their roommates, friends, and classmates in a variety of settings. Bonniers reflect in small group discussions, both formally and informally. Rhodes also offers an academic

course on “Hunger, Plenty, and Justice,” and a six week faith-based reflection program on “Poverty and Compassion.”

What Makes The Project Unique

Unlike traditional soup kitchens where guests line up at a buffet, Souper Contact provides guests with a restaurant-style meal. This setup meets immediate needs for a well-balanced meal and provides an opportunity for volunteers and guests to build friendships and to learn from one another. Some regular guests occasionally speak on campus and consider themselves co-educators.

Benefits

Students, including Bonner Scholars, have the opportunity to serve as project coordinators, meal planners and buyers, cooks, and servers. Local churches, youth groups, and civic organizations often turn to Souper Contact to learn more about hunger and homelessness.

Resources And Partners

Rhodes

- The student allocations fund finances meals during the school year. Rhodes student government and allocations board sets aside annual funds made available from student activities fees.
- Kinney Program for Community Service recruits and trains students to serve as Souper Contact volunteers, coordinators, and buyers.
- The chaplain and Community Service Office provide administrative support, advising, and advocacy.
- Rhodes food services participates in a food salvage program that provides food for the Tuesday evening meal.

St. John’s United Methodist Church

- Provides facilities, kitchen equipment, storage space, and hired security on Tuesdays at no charge to Souper Contact.

The Bonner Foundation Crisis Ministry Program

- Provides funding for Souper Contact to continue during the summer.

Memphis Police Department

- Provides regular patrol and attention to the area, in order to help protect homeless guests who are often vulnerable to crime and abuse.

Church Health Center

- Located across the street from Souper Contact, this health care service for the working and homeless poor and offers first aid treatment if needed.

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

- Provides volunteers and meals while the students are out of town for winter break.

Local Organizations and Businesses

- Provides a variety of donated goods, including canned food, clothing, gloves, hats, and coats. Donations are stored on campus or at a nearby church until coordinators deliver them to Souper Contact on Tuesdays.

Overcoming Challenges

In the early years of the program, when guests stood in a soup line, occasional fights and frequent disputes occurred. Smaller, weaker, and older guests were sometimes pushed to the rear of the line. Students shifted the structure from a soup line to a community café, and guests were serviced at tables. The new format required additional volunteers, but it has significantly contributed to a much more relaxed, respectful, and conversational atmosphere.

Evidence of Success

Some people are impressed that Souper Contact has lasted for over sixteen years. In 1988-89, twenty to thirty guests gathered for meals, and there are now 80-90 guests each Tuesday. Week-to-week progress is evident in the number of meals served, increased funding, conversations between participants, and the preserved dignity of the homeless and hungry. Students and guests are thankful that the program has provided a consistent week-to-week service, but they agree that the true mark of success will be when such a program is no longer necessary in Memphis.

How to Make it Grow

It is hoped that the need for meals will not grow. For as long as the meals are needed, however, students will continue to (1) recruit first-year students to become consistent volunteers over a four-year period, (2) seek new sources of long-term funding, (3) design better integration with academic and faith-based learning, and (4) nurture an environment around meals where students and community members can cross cultural and economic barriers to learn from one another and work together for social change.