

Anchorage Daily News

Make a donation -- make a difference

By Elise Patkotak
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As you prepare for your holiday meal with friends and family, the idea that there are people in this town going to sleep hungry is probably not one you want to ponder. It's understandable.

Thanksgiving is a day for football, turkey, pies, family and general groaning at how tight your pants have suddenly gotten. It is also, apparently, the only day in the year when you can put canned onion pieces on top of canned string beans that have been mixed with canned mushroom soup and praise the results.

The reality in Anchorage is there are people of every size, shape, color and age who know the only meal they can count on is at Bean's Café. Beyond that, getting regular meals is a bit of a crap shoot. Sometimes you do. Sometimes you don't. And sometimes the sound of your child's stomach growling as you try to sleep in your car at night keeps you more awake than the sounds of nearby traffic. We can debate all we want about who's to blame for this, but all that matters in the end is that there are people hungry in a country with an overabundance of food. And that simply seems wrong.

I was down at Bean's a few weeks ago when the Benjamin Moore Paint Company sponsored a project to paint a shelter in each state over the course of one month. Bean's had been spending its money on food, not paint. It needed a face-lift. During our dark winter months, a cheerful interior can be critically uplifting.

The actual painting was done by three local companies that deserve to be named because they freely gave their time and labor to help those less fortunate in their community. So a hearty thank you to Hernandez Enterprises Inc.; Campbell Painting; and Magic Painting and Taping Inc. It doesn't get much better than local companies acknowledging by their actions the need for everyone to do their part to help those less fortunate.

The interior of Bean's is now much cheerier. While it might not feel exactly like home, it helps the people eating there to forget for just a moment how hard their lives have become, how cold and dark it is outside, and how much their days run together into a single blur of survival. And yes, I'm aware that for more than a few people sitting down to eat at Bean's, this is their break from being drunk and that they have brought some of their hardships on themselves. That doesn't make them less than human. If so great a man as Jesus could teach that we should care for all God's creation without question or judgment, then maybe that's exactly what we should do -- especially since I don't remember any test he required the poor to pass before holding out his hand to them or sharing his fish and bread.

So what can you do to both enjoy your holiday, feast without guilt -- well, except of course for the guilt the scale will provide the next time you step on it -- and feel good about your contribution to your community?

Well, one thing might be to contribute to the Beanie Boxes that Bean's makes each year to distribute to their clients. You can go to their website at www.beanscafe.org and find out what they need to fill these boxes. You can make your own or contribute items to boxes that will be made there.

The needs of the poor can seem so very overwhelming sometimes. A Beanie Box is a simple thing that makes a tremendous difference, because it really is true that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. And while you can't change the life of every person living in poverty or despair, held prisoner to fear or addictions or a plain old miserable economy, you can make a difference in one person's life if only for a few days by making a Beanie Box for them.

You may not think that a travel sized bar of soap or tube of toothpaste is even worth looking at in the grocery aisle. For someone living on the street and eating at Bean's, it can be more valuable than the whole Thanksgiving dinner you just served.

It's simply a matter of perspective.