

29-year-old tragedy spurs act of kindness

Christmas Day meal served up to homeless

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, CALGARY HERALD DECEMBER 18, 2010

Sometimes, tragedies can inspire humans in their suffering to partake in acts of kindness for other people.

The annual Bannerman/Clark Christmas Day lunch at the Mustard Seed is a sterling example of how good came out of a horrific situation.

For the past 29 years, volunteers have come together to serve Calgary's homeless a healthy meal on that day.

"Twenty nine years ago, my two brothers were killed in a tragic car accident -- that's how it started," says Paula Bannerman, who organizes the event.

Her brothers were on a ski trip coming back home from Lake Louise when they were involved in a head-on collision.

"That year, we were wondering how we were going to get through the Christmas season. My sister Brenda came up with the idea, 'Why don't we do something for somebody who's hurting worse than us to help us get through that year.' For the first 14 years, we held it at First Baptist Church because that's where my brothers went to church."

But as the interest in the meal continued and grew, it got too big for the church and it was moved to the downtown Mustard Seed, just behind the Calgary Tower.

This year, it will take place from noon to 4 p.m.

Hundreds of volunteers help out both on Christmas Eve for the preparations and on Christmas Day for the meal.

Besides food, there is also non-stop entertainment. And the lunch is open to anyone.

"We open it up to anybody that wants to come that feels that they need to be there. They come get a plate of food. They can sit and listen to music. They can stay as long as they want," says Bannerman.

Guests also receive gifts.

Last year, about 1,500 meals were served at the Mustard Seed.

"This is what God would want: to be the hands and feet of Christ and to do things for other people," says Bannerman. "To me that's what Christmas is all about -- to give back to the community, people in need."

It was Feb. 26, 1982, when Johnnie, 21, and Pat, 19, Bannerman died in the tragic crash.

At Thanksgiving that year, parents Del and Doug joined relatives Everett and Gertie Clark. In 1974, the Clarks lost their 10-year-old son Darren, who had an asthma attack.

Out of the heartache both families experienced came the heartwarming idea to put on a lunch for the city's poor and homeless during Christmas.

"We've been repaid a thousand times," said Del in the book *Miracle on Centre Street* by Gerald W. Hankins. "It strengthened us. Now I don't think there is one person of our family who is not involved in some sort of helping occupation or profession."

This year, the people involved in the Bannerman/Clark lunch have also partnered with the Children's Cottage Society to serve meals and friendship at Brenda's House transition shelter for families.

Paula Bannerman has taken over the main organizer duties from her mother Del, and her sister Wendy organizes all the music. The rest of her family joins the hundreds of volunteers who make this event happen every year.

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