The sunshine and blue skies on Saturday morning, October 9, seemed to be part of the atmosphere inside the Brother Benno Center as well, as guests, volunteers, and friends celebrated 27 years of service to the poor and homeless. The upbeat music provided by Eric and Joanne Kragenbrink made it almost impossible to sit quietly; people swayed and clapped between taking bites of the delicious spaghetti meal, and a few even danced in the crowded space between tables.

Harold Kutler opened the festivities, and Kay was there with their son Jim and Kay’s caretaker, Janice. You didn’t have to wonder whether or not Kay was having a good time; music has always been one of her joys. In fact, at one point, the crowd heard a tape of Kay singing some of her all-time favorites like “Baby Face,” “Second-Hand Rose” (which was also Brother Benno’s favorite), and “I’m Just Wild About Harry.”

Harold honored a grandmother as the person who was served the three-millionth meal, and the woman’s granddaughter as the one who received the 200,000th night of shelter. The grandmother is raising her granddaughter, and they had stayed at one of Brother Benno’s shelters when the down economy made it impossible for the woman to make ends meet. With the help of Solutions for Change, they have now moved into an apartment.

Several Oceanside City officials came to participate in the party. Mayor Jim Wood presented a proclamation, read by Housing Commissioner Kay Parker. Councilwoman Esther Sanchez praised the work being done by Brother Benno’s, then shared a story about her own mother, who—along with her family—had been homeless at one point in their lives. She said her mother told the children that you can accomplish anything if you believe in yourself, and the family was eventually able to get back on their feet and become successful.

Servants of the Poor Liz Windle and Tom von Betticher were in charge of the day’s events, ably assisted by Program Members, who, according to Liz, “were such a help, as always, in addition to their regular workday.” Liz and Tom each led a group of interested attendees on a tour of the Center, and many other volunteers were there to help or just to be part of the festivities.

There’s nothing quite as wonderful as a party at Brother Benno’s!
FOND RECOLLECTIONS

by Helene McGill

When I walked into the Center for the first time (in 2002), I was greeted by Sue Devey. She gave me a tour and told me all about the Center and her association with it for so many years. She emphasized how agreeable everyone was. That did it—I was hooked. I soon came to realize that Sue was the prototype of the Bro Benno volunteer—pleasant and unirritating in her efforts.

For about a year and a half, I came in on most Fridays and helped Blanche Ogle make brown-bag lunches and then open cans, wash fruits, and cut up vegetables for the volunteers and Program Members’ lunches. I looked forward to it, because every week was another trip down memory lane as Blanche reminisced about her dear family and her “founder” status with Bro Benno’s. She was a loving woman and was respected and loved by all the guys. Pretty soon, I felt like an adopted relative. I sometimes drove her home, and she showed me her apartment and the lovely things her children gave her.

Kay and Harold are perfect role models. Their genuine dedication, joy, and tireless love work the many little everyday miracles that Bro Benno’s is famous for.

(Editor’s Note: Sue still volunteers at Bro Benno’s. Blanche died in 2008 at the age of 86.)

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KAY IS EVERYBODY’S ANGEL
By Barbara Ladwig

Kay Kutler is the most beloved person in the Brother Benno “family.” She’s been the personification of the good work that’s been done for the poor and homeless over the past 27 years, and she is often called an angel by her husband Harold.

Anyone who ever saw Kay’s office at the Center knows that she had angels everywhere on the walls and shelves. Harold now uses that office, and he has kept the angel theme intact, so it feels like Kay is still there.

Even though health problems now make it impossible for Kay to be the everyday presence that we all came to depend on, we feel her spirit throughout the Center; and the staff and volunteers seem to have an inner urge to carry on the love she gave so freely to everyone.

Denise Seymour, a new Servant of the Poor who decorates the dining room, became aware of the warm affection everyone has for Kay. “I have gotten to know and experience the love you have for Kay and all she has given at the Center,” she said in an email to staff and volunteers, “and in my heart I feel led to fill the dining room with angels (in her honor).” She said she wasn’t sure exactly how this would all unfold, but she hoped others would come forward with their own ideas.

Several things are in the works, but one has already been accomplished. Gayle Chew, a member of Girlfriends Care (GC), handcrafted two pillows for Kay. Gini Craig, also of GC, recently presented the pillows to Harold “as a gift of love for Kay Kutler.” The pillows feature embroidered scripture quotes, one of which is: “For to his angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways.” Psalm 91:11

When Gayle heard about the angel theme for Kay, she said she prayed about it; and she could see two small pillows cushioning Kay’s arms as they lay on the arms of a wheelchair (even though she didn’t know at the time that Kay was already in a wheelchair).

At a GC meeting, the members created an over-sized greeting card for Kay, with everyone writing notes of love and appreciation inside. And they topped off their gifts with an angel jewelry box.

Kay’s outpouring of love over the years is being carried forward by many who have been touched by her. Guests still tell Harold how a hug from Kay meant the world to them when they felt that no one cared about them. Volunteers who might have come to the Center with heavy hearts knew that a hug from Kay—along with her million-dollar smile—were just what they needed to brighten their day.

We will share other parts of this angel project with you as they come to fruition.

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