

## **Harbor Homes serves up annual Thanksgiving meal**

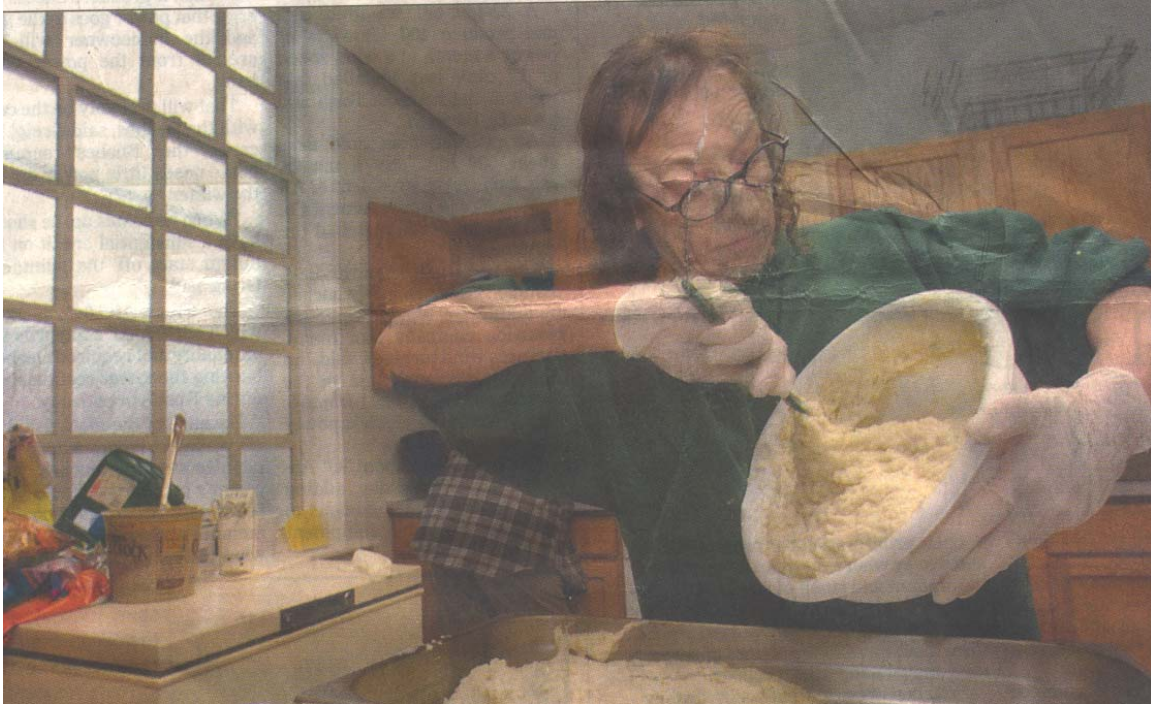
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Author: PATRICK MEIGHAN

Telegraph Staff

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This was a day for angels in the kitchen. Priscilla Pica is one such angel. On Tuesday morning, she stood in the small **Harbor Homes** kitchen in Nashua, feverishly re-whipping potatoes to smooth out the lumps.

"When this day's over, I'm having myself committed," joked Pica, who also spent hours over the past weekend in the kitchen peeling potatoes, sweet potatoes and squash.

In a few hours, those vegetables would be served as part of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for about 350 people, many of whom are struggling with issues related to mental illness, substance abuse, HIV or homelessness.

Pica calls these people "my community." Besides being a volunteer, she also is a client of Connections, a **Harbor Homes** program.

Another kitchen angel, Toby Rodrigues, also receives services from the social service agency and offers his time as a volunteer. He joined Pica over the weekend helping with the massive premeal preparations.

"I just think it's good to give back," Rodrigues said. He said he has a disability and receives housing aid through **Harbor Homes**.

"I get more out of volunteering. I've been on the other side, too," Rodrigues said.

This is the seventh year that **Harbor Homes**, located at 45 High St., has sponsored the Thanksgiving dinner, said Cynthia Andreola, community relations manager for the social service agency.

Last year, 250 people were served dinner. This year, organizers were expecting more than 300. The dinner

was scheduled to start at noon and run through 3 p.m., with several seatings.

#### Community supper

At 1 p.m., the dining room was packed with about 130 people for the second seating, and organizers estimated they would hit 350 or more for the day.

About half were people served by **Harbor Homes** programs. The other half were people from throughout the community.

"Maybe they're people who know about the program but who choose to stay out on the streets," Andreola said. "Or they're people who don't so much need our services as need companionship."

Some lonely elderly people fall into that category, Andreola said.

As if on cue to hearken the holiday season, the year's first snowfall began as a small spit of flakes about 9 a.m. Large, picture-postcard flakes swirled earthward by the time the turkey, stuffing, cranberries and assorted vegetables were dished out at noon.

Thirty-six turkeys were donated by the New Hampshire Food Bank. Other turkeys and food donations - even ceramic turkeys and flower bouquets for table centerpieces - came from the community. About 25 volunteers helped serve the dinner.

As mealtime approached, Jim Edmunds was one of the kitchen's busiest angels.

Edmunds, a cook for Keystone House, has helped prepare such dinners for 11 years, the past two at **Harbor Homes**. By 10 a.m., he had already carved 11 turkeys, and he had expected to carve about 20 that day.

As busy as he was, he could have been much busier, Edmunds said.

"A lot of them are coming in already carved, which is nice," he said.

Like Pica and Rodrigues, Pam O'Neil has been on both sides of such dinners. She now serves on the board of directors for **Harbor Homes** and is a regular volunteer with Connections, formerly The Gathering Place. O'Neil suffered from bipolar disorder and earlier in life was a consumer of the type of services the program provides its clients.

"I hope this is a stepping stone to being rehabilitated," said O'Neil, who cut up broccoli and cauliflower for the dinner.

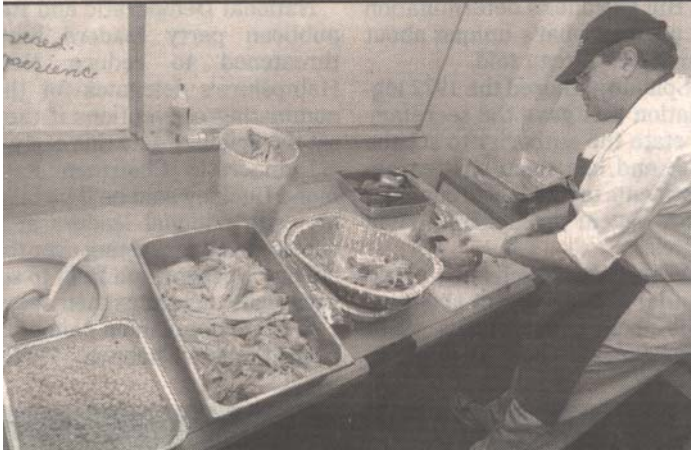
"They're all good people. They're all trying very hard with some very difficult things to solve," she said.

One of those good people struggling with a tough issue is Ivette Robles, who enjoyed the dinner with her adult son. Robles has HIV and receives services through the Southern New Hampshire HIV/AIDS Task Force.

"For me, it's like being reunited with a family," Robles said in Spanish about the dinner.

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Carving 14 turkeys, Jim Edmunds, the food service superintendent at Keystone Hall, prepares the Thanksgiving community dinner Tuesday at **Harbor Homes** in Nashua.



Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

#### Giving thanks

To make the Thanksgiving dinner a success, a host of angels lent a hand. They included companies, such as ADM, which donated coffee, and others, such as a Hollis Girl Scout troop and Hollis Women's Club, which also made donations.

"People have been just showing up and bringing bags of groceries," Andreola said.

The kitchen archangel, if you will, is an elderly man who prefers to be anonymous. Andreola estimated that he's in his late 80s, or maybe 90s. He won't even give his name to **Harbor Homes** staff, she said.

The man arrives once a month with a car full of groceries, which he buys with his social security checks after scouring supermarket flyers and shopping for sales. He also donated food for the Thanksgiving dinner. The man says he lives with his children and needs nothing for himself, but he knows that there are people in the community who need so much, Andreola said.

"It's so heart-warming to see that," said Carolyn McLaughlin, a **Harbor Homes** staff member who works on the Web site for the organization.

Of course, wherever angels are present, miracles are certain to be found.

Harley Connors, 4, sat happily munching chocolate cake. The young boy suffers from cancer and received a liver transplant in 2006.

He was introduced to the diners on a stage, where a musician provided entertainment during the dinner.

"I was almost in tears when he was on the stage," said Peter Kelleher, the president and chief executive officer for **Harbor Homes**.

"He's doing great. He has a new lease on life," Kelleher said.

As Harley enjoyed dessert beside his twin sister, Hailey, the children's mother, Ann-Marie Shouley, described Harley's recovery as a miracle.

Although doctors are still watching him very closely, Harley now is cancer free, she said.

"I have so much to be thankful for," Shouley said.

Caption:

Volunteer Priscilla Pica whips potatoes for the Thanksgiving community dinner Tuesday at **Harbor Homes** in Nashua.

Caption:

Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

Memo: Patrick Meighan can be reached at 594-6518 or pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com.

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