

# Shelter From the Storm

By Lauren Kessler

Jesse sits at the long, stainless steel table chopping onions in that quick, careful way you learn in culinary school and perfect during long hours in commercial kitchens. He's preparing what will be tomorrow's entrée—a favorite here at Food for Lane County's Dining Room: Southwest chicken casserole.

Angie is a few feet away, rummaging in the room-sized cold storage unit, loading a trolley with gallons of milk and cartons of fruit juice. She wheels it out to the beverage bar in the main room, then returns for the dessert cart, its tall stack of shelves stocked with slices of cake and pie donated by local grocers. Rene hefts industrial-sized serving pans from the back counters to the steam table. One of the pans is piled high with pork chops. Another has mounds of mashed potatoes. There's a pan with green salad and another with quartered oranges.

This will be today's lunch at The Dining Room—a former soup kitchen that now operates as a sit-down restaurant with table service, cloth napkins, an attentive wait staff, live music and an attitude that long ago evolved from philanthropy to neighborliness. Monday through Thursday, more than 200 hungry people come to this modest brick building on Eighth Street just west of downtown Eugene, Oregon, for a meal. For some, too many, it may be their only meal of the day.

These diners, like almost half a million Oregonians—and one in five Oregon children—are food insecure, meaning they lack reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In fact, in any 10-year period, about half of all Americans experience economic woes severe enough for them to have trouble adequately feeding themselves or their families. Seniors may have to choose between enough food and paying for prescription medications. Young families with government-funded food assistance sometimes cannot make it through the month on those benefits. Those who live paycheck to paycheck may have to choose between paying the rent or filling the grocery cart. Hunger is not just a problem for those living on the street.

Lane County, the fourth-most populous

county in Oregon, has the second-highest rate of hunger in the state. The Dining Room, one of Food for Lane County's most beloved programs, is on the front line, serving not just food but "generous portions of dignity," as Manager Josie McCarthy puts it. It was Josie's idea to convert what used to be a Great Depression-style, grab-a-tray-wait-in-line soup kitchen into an eatery that could pass for a local restaurant. "Except," Josie adds, waiting a beat, "it's free."

Food for Lane County has been on the job since 1984 when a single staffer and one volunteer started running the agency out of





a small house in Springfield. Today it is the second-largest food bank in the state with more than a dozen programs—from Meals on Wheels to Children’s Weekend Snack Packs, from rural pantries to urban gardens, from nutritional education to job training—and a network of 151 partner agencies. The nonprofit’s goal is to solicit, collect, grow, rescue, prepare, package and serve food for distribution to the county’s most vulnerable citizens. Its Herculean mission: End hunger.

At The Dining Room, the mission is

more modest and immediate: Feed the hungry people who show up at the door.

It’s noon on a Wednesday, and a line of diners queues up in the parking lot. Families with small children, the elderly and those with disabilities will be seated immediately. Others take a ticket and wait for their number to be called.

Under a small tent at the desk, staffers Rachel and Tyrone check in each diner, greeting many by name. They act as maitre d’s and, in the rare instance of trouble,

bouncers. Once inside, the diners seat themselves at one of the seven booths, four tables or along the eight-stool counter. It is an intimate space with room for 45.

Picture windows overlook a tree-lined street. Four bold, colorful murals decorate the walls. On the wall next to the chalkboard menu is a hand-painted 12-stanza poem about struggling to survive. On another wall is this quotation from Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: “... for now all I ask is the justice of eating.”

The nine volunteers on duty today ready themselves for the first rush. They are part of the almost 80-person roster of community members who donate 850 hours a month to keep The Dining Room humming. Michelle is a pediatrician. Rich owns a commercial painting company. Milan works in his family's import business. Judy is a retired teacher. Guy is a writer. Shelley just sold her store downtown.

On other days, an accountant, a minister, a massage therapist and a former police officer help out. A woman who used to be homeless volunteers now, as does a man who served time. His first meal out of jail was here.

High school, community college and university students take shifts as do groups from local churches, temples and civic organizations. They plate food, wait and bus tables, pour coffee, circulate with dessert trays, scrape plates and play music.

You would think these volunteers, or perhaps the hard-working team of staffers, would be the heroes of this story. All are

compassionate and generous folks, resolute in their care for their community. But the real champions are the people who make their way inside, those with lives so full of challenges there seems room for little else. But there is room here. There is room to sit unhassled, to be warm and dry or cool and out of the sun, to take a breath, to feel safe, to feel part of a community that cares.

Sean, Sasha and two of their four young children sit at the first booth.

Sean has a decent job with the city, but his small raises have led to successive cuts in the family's SNAP benefits.

With one wage earner and six mouths to



feed, the family depends on The Dining Room and Sasha's weekly trips to the food pantry. Their little girl, decked out in a pink tutu, is bobbing up and down in her seat. Her energy fills the room.

At the next booth sits Timmy,\* who has been on the streets for 17 years. His clothes hang on his slight frame. His troubles, whatever they are, show on his long, pale face. Sometimes he sits alone, staring into his plate, eating with the focus and intensity of someone who doesn't often sit in front of a full plate. Today he sits next to Wanda,\* an older woman he has taken under his wing. She balances herself with a walking stick. She hears voices. She used to come to The Dining Room ragged and unwashed, a protection against rape and abuse. Now she has Timmy, and she is safe.

Sheri takes her usual seat in a banquetette near the door. She is legally blind, but she has been coming to The Dining Room for so long she has the layout memorized. Sometimes her son, who is autistic, is with her. Often she brings along someone from the social services companion program she works for part-time—a person whose disabilities might make coming alone too much of a challenge. Sheri is attentive, kind, genuine. She saves a few dollars every month to donate to Food for Lane County.

Across from her this afternoon, conversing pleasantly about the weather, sits John. He is a burly 67-year-old who shaves his head every three days to reveal a large tattoo not expertly inked, an eyeball that covers a third of his scalp.

A couple in their 80s sits in the fourth booth. They are gentle with each other, caring. She places a napkin on his lap; he offers her a forkful of dessert. Observers might mistake them for an old married

couple, but they are not. They found each other on the streets. Together, with access to neither transportation nor a computer, they've negotiated the byzantine world of social services and have finally secured a place to live. They share this news with everyone who walks by the booth, acquaintance and stranger alike. They beam at each other.

At a small table near the entrance sits a small man in a jaunty cap dressed head-to-toe in bright green. He looks like a leprechaun. Across from him is a middle-aged woman with carefully applied makeup and the ready-for-an-interview outfit she just bought at St. Vinnie's. If she gets this job, she can make next month's rent. The man in green wishes her luck, tipping his cap. He says he's sure she'll get it.

The diners accept each other with grace and patience. There's the woman who cradles a doll as if nursing her; the man who sways back and forth, singing as he eats; the woman who gestures as if conducting an orchestra; the man who positions his face an inch from his plate and shovels in the food with his hands. The man who proclaims every day to be his birthday. The man who hasn't showered in months.

This is a safe haven of dignity and respect for those whose everyday lives often include neither. And it is the diners themselves who make this happen. They leave the chaos, confusion and uncertainty of their lives at the door. They bring in their best selves. Their ability to survive is a lesson in heroism. Their acceptance of and generosity toward each other are even more powerful lessons.

When the pandemic closed The Dining Room to sit-down service in mid-March, Josie and her team pivoted, immediately

## Ways to Help

- ▶ Donate to your local food bank.
- ▶ Volunteer at a local organization serving the hungry.
- ▶ Donate to a charity or local food drive.

To locate food banks across the U.S., check out [feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank](https://feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank).

switching to takeout service, dispensing two hot meals and two sack lunches every week from a long table set outside. The hungry kept coming, lining up in the parking lot, 6-feet distant, taking their meals from masked and gloved staffers, finding places to eat in nearby parks or in alleys or on stairwells. It wasn't the same. But it was something.

With its closely spaced booths and tables, its elbow-to-elbow places at the counter and its single entrance, The Dining Room is an intimate indoor space that probably cannot safely be reopened until the pandemic is history. Josie is busy searching for a substitute venue, a welcoming space.

"It's about the food," she says, "but we know—all of us—that it's about so much more."

A diner approaches the table where Rachel and Tyrone hand out today's lunches. He's a regular, a loner, not unfriendly but quiet and self-contained. He takes the sack and stands there, shifting from foot to foot, looking at the asphalt. Then he pulls down his paper mask, looks up and smiles. ■

\*This name is changed.

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**ABOUT THE SERIES:** Pioneer Utility Resources, publisher of Ruralite magazine, spotlights Heroes Among Us each month, sharing the unique stories of volunteers and difference-makers in communities across the Northwest and West. The series, which seeks to inspire community involvement, receives support from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust—a private nonprofit foundation serving nonprofits across the Pacific Northwest, including Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

**About the author:** Lauren Kessler is a nationally noted award-winning author of narrative nonfiction. She is also a regular Ruralite reader. Her latest book is "A Grip of Time: When Prison Is Your Life." To learn more, go to [laurenkessler.com](https://laurenkessler.com)