

## **ALL ARE WELCOME**

### **TACT**

**TACT is a ‘meal center, not a soup kitchen’**

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TAUNTON — By 6:15 p.m. on a mightily hot Thursday, about 50 diners had been served tableside. The building’s doors to this communal gathering opened an hour earlier than usual — 3:30 p.m. instead of 4:30 — so that patrons could enter the air-conditioned hall for relief from the heat. Once inside, the adults, some of whom bring their children, sit and relax, talk and share conversation while sitting around a table. It’s a night out for everyone to enjoy, whether they sit with others or sit by themselves.

It’s been this way inside 378 Bay St., home to the Taunton Area Community Table, for over a year.

Since Jan. 15, 2015, volunteers have been working together to provide nutritious, healthy and freshly prepared meals to guests in an underserved area of the city.

“We just felt this was a really good area to locate the meal center,” said Wendy Berry, a co-founder and co-director of the community table.

From its inception, the community table was meant to be “a meal center, not a soup kitchen,” Berry said.

Creating a place where people could come and sit in safety and dignity remains key to its founding, she adds.

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**ABOVE: Kaleigh Applebee, left, and Amber Parks, both 11 and volunteers with the Old Colony YMCA's Togetherhood project, serve Mary and Joe at the Taunton Area Community Table Meal Center. BELOW: IKEA's Ryan Fitzsimmons serves Arthur Silva, left, Joseph Orfao and Maria Medeuís.**

TAUNTON GAZETTE PHOTOS | MIKE GAY

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“A place where families and children are welcome and feel welcomed,” said Berry.

Meals are free of charge, notes a small poster inside the hall's entrance. “No questions asked. All are welcome. Join us for a great meal!” it states.

There is no assigned seating. On this particular Thursday, the day an evening meal is served, men, women and children may sit at any of the round, smooth-topped tables. Each table seats four, the chairs comfortable and supportive. A salt and pepper shaker grace each table; some tables have electric candlesticks to add to the decor.

The dining experience, or any meal experience at the meal center, is meant to be that of a restaurant. The burgundycolored paper placemats and a fork and spoon wrapped in a paper napkin and bound by a darker

burgundy label seal the eating utensils. In another act of shared community, individuals served by Dighton-based Cooperative Production Inc., or CO-OP, prepare the place settings, Berry explained.

A volunteer comes to the table and asks a diner which choice of hot or cold beverage he or she would like. A fresh green salad with creamy Italian dressing drizzled over yellow bell peppers, grape tomatoes and cucumbers is brought to the diner. Later, the hot meal follows and dessert.

Word has begun to spread about the Thursday night meal at the Family Café, Berry said. The doors open at 4:30 p.m. Dinner is served from 5 to 7 p.m.

In 2015, 18,000 meals were served.

“I think we’ll be close to doubling that,” she said about 2016. “We feel very lucky that people feel very safe and nurtured here,” Berry said.

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, lunch is served from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Also on Wednesday, a story hour begins at 10:30 a.m. New this year is Picnic Fridays. Adults and children can pick up a bag lunch from 11 a.m to 12:30 p.m. and either eat inside or take the lunch with them. One family usually picks up its lunch and walks to Hopewell Park for a fun outing, added Berry.

Money to pay for the meals and any programs supported by TACT come from different sources, primarily grants. The meal center receives no funding from the city, Berry said. Three part-time paid staff work at TACT. About 20 volunteers help out, from all backgrounds.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul offers food donations as needed.

“We have tremendous support in the city,” said Berry.

In addition to food donations, children’s books, paper, crayons and colored markers are readily given. Gifts to the meal center also come from other children. Sometimes, a boy or girl celebrating a birthday will ask that people bring children’s toys or stationery supplies instead of presents to a party.

Other activities at the meal center include Lego night, which is held on the first and third Thursdays of the month. In the fall, a crafts night may be added to the Thursday lineup, said Berry.

Most of the youngsters served by TACT are 12 years old and younger.

“We don’t see a lot of teenage kids. If we did, we would definitely start programs for them,” said Berry.

Berry recounts an early experience she had helping her mother prepare sandwiches for people in need. From that moment, she never looked back, never backed down from community service.

“To whom much is given, much is expected,” Berry said about her personal and guiding philosophy. “I’ve really lived a charmed life. This is the way that I feed my soul and I give back.”

On this particular Thursday night, the meal center servers and volunteers clearly reflect Berry’s attitude about service to others. Hunger does not discriminate, as Berry noted earlier, and it may not show outwardly on a child’s or adult’s face.

Happiness and feeling good about oneself, especially for a child, usually shines bright.

As it does on this Thursday night. The air-conditioning inside the meal center is refreshing. Berry said it was so hot that the decision to order pizza was made earlier in the day to keep the indoor temperature down. Outside, a 90-plus degree day felt stifling. Heating up the meal center’s kitchen and cooking on its stove or in its ovens would have been unbearable for diners and servers. Twenty to 25 pizzas were ordered from the Whittenton House of Pizza.

“They were very accommodating,” Berry said.

Determining how many people may come to dinner can be a challenge, as many restaurateurs know. That’s part of the challenge, said Berry.

“We never know who is going to show up. We could plan for 75 and 100 could show up. You have to think on your feet,” she said while smiling.

Food storage is not a problem, due to another grant award. At the beginning of the summer, a grant from Eastern Bank allowed for the purchase of a commercial-size fridge.

“We’re hoping in the next few months to raise money for a commercial freezer,” Berry said.

Recently, the meal center benefitted from a makeover, courtesy of IKEA furnishings.

“The Taunton Area Community Table was nominated to participate in the Life Improvement Challenge, a nationwide campaign where IKEA donates \$10,000 worth of product and services to a deserving charity. After being nominated, co-workers and the public can submit their votes online for their charity of choice. TACT is an amazing organization that supports many people in need,” wrote IKEA local marketing specialist Megan Williams in an email to the *Gazette*.

It wasn’t only Berry and all who make the meal center successful in its mission who were pleased by the makeover.

“IKEA Stoughton was thrilled to provide a makeover to this space as the organization works hard every day to provide a time for individuals and families to sit and enjoy a meal together. We worked for four days building the furniture for the children’s area and serving area and organization for their storage downstairs. To provide the meal on Thursday was the icing on the cake for us. We were able to see the space in use and with our coworkers serving the families and doing face painting for the kids, it gave the wonderful volunteers the time to enjoy their new space,” wrote Williams.

Kitchen workspace items such as moveable carts, book shelves and tall storage cases are some of the new furnishings provided by IKEA.

The other changes that have happened at the meal center involve the people who rely on its availability.

In one example, Berry speaks of a man who used to be a guest at the meal center.

“He got his life in order and got a job, working the overnight shift in a bakery,” she said, “and everyday he delivers us their [oversupply], which is really cool.”

The building that houses the meal center is part of the property of St. John’s Episcopal Church. The church is closed; earlier, it merged with two other Protestant churches. Berry is a member of one of the parishes.

The property at 378 Bay St. is for sale, acknowledges Berry.

“We’re here as long as we can be,” she said. “When we came here to look at it, it was a sad building. Now, it’s a happy place.”

To learn more about the Taunton Area Community Table, call 508-386-3807. Or, go online to [tactmealcenter.org](http://tactmealcenter.org).



**From left, Taunton Area Community Table Co-Director Wendy Berry and volunteers John Adams and Joanne Baptiste plate the IKEA-donated meal.**

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