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A Tale of Two Cities

by Pia de Jong and Lanny Jones

The guard in the kiosk raises the gate and waves the truck into a paved road winding through an expanse of snow-covered fields, ponds, and fountains that might as well be in a French country estate. But this is the corporate headquarters of Bristol-Myers Squibb on Route 206 in Lawrenceville. We park in a brick courtyard, almost a piazza, as smiling people carry out two dozen bags packed with cans and boxes of cereal, tomato sauce, meatballs, and all the canned delicacies prepared by Chef Boyardee.

These foods, all contributed by executives, staffers, and their families at the company, are loaded into a cargo van operated by The Crisis Ministry of Mercer County, with offices in Princeton and Trenton. Someone has called in sick, so the Dodge van is being driven today by the executive director herself, a cheerful woman named Carolyn Biondi. Just two years ago a fire destroyed 30 tons of food at the pantry and left the building unstable. But after extensive renovations, the pantry was re-opened this fall, and today it's back in business, collecting donated foodstuffs and providing other services for needy people in both Princeton and Trenton.

Soon the truck is loaded with gaily decorated bags, and Biondi is on the road. Twenty minutes later she turns a corner, and suddenly we are plunged into a scene straight out of Dickens — brick rowhouses, some vacant, with unemployed people sitting in front, almost all African-American men. This is Trenton, where the celebrated sign on the bridge over the Delaware River proclaims, "Trenton Makes the World Takes." These days, though, the city that made the steel cables for the Brooklyn Bridge now makes too little the world wants or takes. Crime and unemployment are among the highest in the state. Twenty percent of the people don't have enough to eat.

Here Biondi drives through another gate with a bar that allows people in with swipe passes. This gate does not guard the fields and fountains of a corporate campus, however. It protects cars squeezed in a cement lot with a cyclone fence around it. This is the renovated storefront headquarters of the Crisis Ministry, located in a building on East Hanover Street owned by the First Presbyterian Church of Trenton.

Inside it is warm and quiet as Biondi explains the house rules. People have to show their identity papers and proof of residence before they are assigned a helper. This person, who might well be one of the unemployed working as a trainee, takes clients through the room with shelves filled with food. They all carry yellow plastic cards that specify which foods they can choose. An older lady walks with difficulty choosing two cans of applesauce from the shelf that is labeled: Fruit. Then a can of sweet peas from the Vegetable shelf. She and the volunteer worker helping her walk silently. There is very little conversation until the girl reminds the woman that she reached her limit.

Biondi explains that the amount anyone is entitled to depends on the size of the family. How often they can come for food? "Once a month," Biondi answers. In the rear of the building she proudly opens the door to a huge cooling room. Here milk, eggs, and other perishables are kept, also tended by the unemployed clients who are developing their job skills.

But there is more. In the back is a room called Hope for the Homeless — a place where the Crisis Ministry tries to prevent homelessness by intervening when poor families are on the verge of being evicted from their homes. With some work, and a little luck, the Crisis Ministry may be able to raise the funds to send checks to a landlord or the utility company. People wait here patiently for hours in hope of getting help. It is often their last best hope before ending up on the streets.

The Crisis Ministry was founded in 1980 by Trinity Episcopal and Nassau Presbyterian churches in Princeton. But these days there is nothing religious about it other than the faith its staff of 10 full and part-time workers have that they can make a difference, one person at a time. "There is more demand for our services now than there has been in the past 33 years," says Biondi. They serve 1,500 families a week — or an estimated 10,000 people over the course of a year.

We leave this Dickensian neighborhood and drive past the massive government buildings of the State of New Jersey in order to get to South Trenton, where the Crisis Ministry operates another storefront to serve the largely Latino community that lives there. Along the way we pass the 19th-century steelworks buildings of the Roeblings, who built the Brooklyn Bridge, the pride of industrial America and an inspiration to poets like Walt Whitman and Hart Crane.

We are introduced to the director of the hunger programs at the Crisis Ministry. He is a slender man with blue eyes and red hair pulled back into a ponytail. His name is Mark Smith, but the people who use his services all call him, laughingly, "Mr. Crisis." Mr. Crisis lives in their neighborhood and knows everyone there, greeting them by name when they come in.

"I live here," he explains. "I see them all the time. I know their kids, their parents, their sorrow and hardship." We ask if he would not rather just have people donate money to the Crisis Ministry, so they could buy their own food? "Both," he says. "There is something about sharing food that brings out our humanity, benefits both the receiver and the giver."

As Biondi explains her own story, "I was one of these girls who wanted to help the poor. I became a social worker and found myself caught in a system where nothing I did mattered. I lost faith, was on my way to become an unhappy cynic. After some self-evaluation, I returned to the girl I once was, the idealist that wanted to help. I never felt useless for one minute since."

As we walk back to our car, careful not to slip in the snow, we pass people gathered together outside, in silent clumps. Is it the embarrassment of having to ask for something as basic as food? The anxiety of facing homelessness? Next door to the South Clinton food pantry is a hair styling place called Xclusive Clips. Two barbers are sitting listlessly in the chairs reserved for customers. The place is empty. Above the street is a huge billboard advertising tickets to the New Jersey State Lottery. Win up to \$2,500 a week for life, it proclaims in bold red letters. A woman we saw earlier inside, walks slowly by, carefully holding her bag of groceries. She passes a liquor store, advertising gin as a drink to celebrate happy times.

It should not be this way. People should not go hungry. They should not be without a place to live. But the reality is, in the United States, hunger is real. Food is the remedy.

It is as if God left the earth and decided to let the people mind their own business. But he forgot to take some of his angels with him. They walked around for a while, wondering what to do, and then decided to work at the Crisis Ministry.

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