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Hungry for their next meal, even the poor discriminate

In Northeast Philly, prejudice along with donated food is in full supply at a food pantry where neighborhood whites worry that immigrants may be eating too much.

by Alfred Lubrano

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Immigrant bellies rumble when they're empty, just like Americans'.

Yet at the busy Feast of Justice food pantry in Mayfair, some of the hungry poor make distinctions about who gets to eat donated boxes of pasta and cans of beans.

"A few of our Caucasian guests feel they're more deserving of food than others," said Pastor Tricia Neale of St. John's Lutheran Church, which houses the pantry.

As increasing numbers of Chinese, Syrians, Haitians, and Latinos move in to the Lower Northeast section of Philadelphia, some longtime white residents are reacting with varying degrees of prejudice, Neale said.

Although the poor of all skin shades and religions share indignities, xenophobia and entitlement sometimes overwhelm any commonalities born of

need, she said.

Maybe it's the times.

"The current political climate is such that divisions between people are not frowned upon," said Neale, 44, who gave up a high-paying job at the Mayo Clinic to feed the poor. The former biomedical engineer shares a patent on a surgical screw inserted in injured spines.

"In fact, we are encouraged to see our differences more drastically. As a result, there's a fear of change in our community."

Feast of Justice is among the most-used pantries in the Philadelphia area, said Neale, whose small but well-stocked cupboard serves 2,300 households, or 8,000 individuals.

Some 55 percent the pantry's clients are white. That can be a source of problems.

"I see resentment from many middle-aged Caucasian guests," said the Rev. Alexa Kvande, a coordinator at the church. People look at newcomers and say, 'They should learn English.' You see a lot of Caucasian guests sighing and huffing and with poor body language when people speak their native tongues. Difference is more a barrier than a richness."

Last week at the pantry, one white, 40-year-old client, unwilling to give her name, proved her preacher's point:

"I worked for everything I ever got," said the woman, dressed in a red sweatshirt and purple sweatpants. "But some of these other people came over here in a banana boat. Take care of American people first, and if there's anything left over, then you give food away."

Told of the woman's remarks, pantry client Nilsa Rodriguez, 53, a former nurse who was born in Puerto Rico and has lived on the mainland since 1976, said, "I ignore what's ignorant. You hear the things people say, but you have to disregard it. You wind up living with it whether you like it or not."

"Syrians and others must always look over their shoulders. They feel offended. Some people don't like diversity at all. And that's not going away."

Rodriguez's observations are shared by Edna Ward, 54, a former nurse assistant who was born in Trinidad. If she hears something derogatory muttered by a white pantry user, she said, "I pay it no mind. It is what it is."

In some ways, old-timers at the pantry, regardless of color, resent immigrants as being disrespectful, noted Peggy Meehan, 66, who volunteers at Feast of Justice. "People think the newcomers have a sense of entitlement, and they get

annoyed when we don't have the exact food they want, like they're in a ShopRite," she said.

On the other hand, Meehan said, "Many white people sense there's not enough food to go around" and worry new people are draining resources, even though everyone gets the same amount, roughly 30 pounds a month for a single person, 50 to 60 pounds for a family of four. "People need to get used to the idea that they're not being invaded here."

Three times a month, community residents are invited to eat communal meals on tables within the church. While barriers are often broken down, Neale said, many of the gatherings foster contentious conversations.

"Fear of change in the community related to skin color, or people practicing different faiths, stir people up at every meal," she said.

Neither prejudice nor hunger should exist, Neale said. But both darken the world.

"These are hard times for everybody," said Edwin Camacho, 53, a native Philadelphian who lost his delivery job when he was injured at work. He said he's fine with sharing the pantry with anybody. "No one here has money. This place is a blessing."

Yes, it is, agreed Lucy Gonzalez, 52, who is of Puerto Rican descent and who has lived in Philadelphia her whole life. Sadly, she said, she's seen newcomers at Feast of Justice mistreated all the time. "It's just not nice," she said.

Then Gonzalez added: "We are all God's children. And no matter what color we are, we all need bread."

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