

Conversation with Priscilla Brayson

'I always liked helping put people in a better place'

By Suzanne McLaughlin

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Priscilla Brayson has been the director of Enfield Loaves & Fishes soup kitchen in the Thompsonville section of Enfield for almost 30 years. During the summer, she is running a bottle drive to raise money for the food shelter. She says people tend to forget that people are hungry in the summer as well as during the cold weather months. Brayson said she and her husband, Murray, said no plans to retire. She embraces helping people to help themselves and others. She believes everybody can help.

Q: It seems like people know about you because of Thanksgiving and Christmas food collections and dinners. But you serve meals here seven days a week. Plus, the number of meals has really been growing over the years, from 15,000 in 1992 to 128,000 in 2016.

A: So far this year at the halfway point we're at 70,000 meals. I think we're probably going to hit 140,000 meals this year. I believe a lot of programs are being cut by the federal government. That increases the number of people who come here either to eat or pick up food. We put out food everyday which people can take. We get stuff from supermarkets and farmers. We also share with other organizations. I shared with Enfield Food Shelf because I had an abundance of produce and other products such as bread. I have chefs who have been with me for 15 years. I have a chef for every day. Everybody here is a volunteer.

Q: Of the people you serve, 45 percent are children?

A: I also feed Educational Resources for Children. I'm doing eight schools and five sites. It is after school all year round. In the summer I do the Lunch Bunch at JFK Middle School. I provide them with all of their snacks. A fruit, a drink, crackers, celery, and carrots. Healthy stuff. It could be milk.

Q: How do people find the soup kitchen?

A: They find out through social services or word of mouth. Or food pantries and churches.

Q: You've been here 30 years. Did you start as a volunteer?

A: Yes. I helped a friend in a bad winter storm to pick up bread. Before you know it I was doing it twice a week, then four times a week. I always

had an open mind. I always liked helping to put people in a better place. I had worked in a battered women's shelter, previous to this, and for the Little Sisters of the Poor on Enfield Street. My mind has always been geared to helping people who are less fortunate than I am.

Q: What did you do for the Little Sisters of the Poor?

A: I was their volunteer coordinator. One day I said, 'I have to get a job or I'll have to leave, Sister.' She said, 'Do you want to be a certified nursing assistant?' They paid for me to go to school.

Q: Was that a good job?

A: The Sisters were wonderful. I love them. To this day I do the readings there at Mass on Sunday. If I get extra food I give it to them. If they get extra food they give it to us.

Q: I'm assuming that as director you're the only paid person at Loaves & Fishes soup kitchen?

A: Yes.

Q: And your husband is the head of the Board of Directors? He's a volunteer?

A: Yes. He was a project manager for United Technologies. He's been volunteering with me for 26 years. They laid him off at Pratt & Whitney. They called him to be a consultant and offered him a job, paying more than what he was getting. Several weeks later he told me 'You need me more than I need to work.' That's how Murray got involved with Loaves & Fishes.

Q: Loaves & Fishes was founded in 1982?

A: February 1982. Six years ago we bought the property from St. Andrew's Church. They were selling the place. The money came from a guest.

Q: Where do your guests come from?

A: Most of them walk here from the neighborhood. I tell them, 'This is not my soup kitchen. It belongs to all of us.' I tell them, 'If I need help, you need to step up,' and they do.

Q: You serve a meal everyday?

A: Yes. From 4 to 5 p.m. We cook for an average of 100. The end of the month is the busiest.

Q: You have clothes here too?

A: Oh yeah. We have donations. We just got a donation of new sneakers. They have to try them on and they have to fit. We were just donated 30 pairs of work boots. Every pair went. Today we



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got sneakers.

Q: There are companies and organizations in town that support you so you can continue to help people?

A: We take private donations from companies and individuals. We have an auction coming up at the Golden Gavel on Oct. 14. We're looking for donations of baskets and gift certificates. There are many companies and organizations in town which give to us and churches give to us.

Q: How many volunteers do you have?

A: We have about 200 volunteers. We are well liked and known.

Q: How many hours a day are you here?

A: I almost live here; 12 to 16 hours a day. More at Christmas.

Q: You do a Christmas party?

A: Beyond that. There is a child in every one of us. We used to just give to the kids years ago. When I saw the child in somebody's eyes, I decided that everybody gets gifts. This past Christmas we had 430 people who came. All the churches collect gifts. We started our Christmas list about a month ago. The Monday before Christmas people start lining up before

noon to get gifts. They go see Santa. My husband is Santa. One room is for children. One family at a time goes in to see Santa. Each child gets four to six gifts. The mother's room is next door. She gets three or four gifts. There is a men's room also for the men to get gifts. We have a hallway of stuffed animals, and a bucket of hats and scarves and socks filled with candy. There is a meal of roast beef and ham, the same day, the Monday before Christmas.

Q: Your food doesn't just feed Enfield families?

A: The woman who just left brings boxes of food to 30 families in Ellington. Anybody who's hungry. I want to do more. Seniors need more help. Low income seniors are hurting. The food is almost superficial to what we do. We help put people in better places. We had a guy who had psoriasis so bad. He couldn't get help. I teared up when I saw his skin. He needed five shots for \$1,500 each. He was so crippled by his skin he couldn't get out of bed to come to eat here. We helped refer him so he could get his shots paid for. I helped somebody who lived in a bed bug infested place. He lived a half mile from here. It wasn't