Inspiration CAFÉ

The incredible non-profit feeds its participants more than good food.

BY TRICIA DESPRES • AMANDA AREIAS PHOTOGRAPHS
people walk into Inspiration Café looking for a way out. They've lost their job and don't have access to daily meals. They remember a time when life was better—when the future held a promise of better days and they believed in themselves.

"Would you like a refill on your coffee?"

Their thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a friendly voice...and for a moment, they feel better.

"The first time I walked into Inspiration Café, I remember having the sense of being at home in my grandmother's kitchen," recalls Shannon K. Stewart, executive director/CEO of Inspiration Corporation. "It was heartwarming to see volunteers cooking and serving meals and the food just smelled so great."

Founded by Lisa Nigro in 1989, Inspiration Café first began within a borrowed red wagon that carried coffee and sandwiches to the needy. Shortly after, the red wagon became a kitchen on wheels and eventually a bus that evolved into a travelling café. In 1998, Inspiration Café opened at 4554 North Broadway, which is also the site of Inspiration Corporation headquarters. In addition to offering meals, Inspiration Café also operates a food pantry open to Inspiration Corporation participants who are homeless, have no recent history of violence and must be willing to work toward self-sufficiency.

"Our mission statement has always included our goal to create an atmosphere of dignity and respect," explains Ms. Stewart. "These words came with Lisa [Nigro] and remain at the heart of everything we do. When people walk into Inspiration Café, they might be in crisis mode or living on the streets. They come into an environment where they can sit down at a table, order food off a menu and be served by a volunteer. It's a different atmosphere than they might experience being in line at a soup kitchen."

Inspiration Café, which also opened another location in Garfield Park, is just one of the many services the Inspiration Corporation provides to over 3,000 individuals, including housing, vital employment preparation/training and meals from The Living Room Café on the South Side.

Inspiration Corporation Business Services Manager Angela Morrison, also a frequent volunteer, says, "There are days when I sit in my office and might not get to see the immediate impact of the work we're doing. Making a visit to Inspiration Café or The Living Room Café gives me the ability to experience firsthand how we're able to impact one's quality of life. There's nothing like giving a person a choice. Having a menu to pick from and giving them options in a comfortable setting is a wonderful experience for them."

"People often get confused at all we have to offer," observes Ms. Stewart. "We actually have two employment work force development programs that help operate our Inspiration Kitchens. These are food service training restaurants open to the public. The cafés are not open to the public, but are rather program sites in which we provide food and services to our homeless and low income participants."

The tables at Inspiration Café also offer a setting in which lively conversations can begin and inspiration can be shared. "It can become a very therapeutic environment, especially when participants who now have jobs and housing come back to volunteer and share their experiences with others," notes Ms. Stewart. "Believe me when I tell you that one can look at this café on any given day and wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a volunteer, staff person and participant. The truth is that we all have more in common than we do differences."

Ms. Stewart says she's thrilled with the direction in which Inspiration Corporation is heading. In fact, plans are currently in place for the non-profit to soon purchase an eight-unit apartment building to provide four units of affordable housing and four units of subsidized housing to large families in Washington Park.

"I'm lucky to have the job," concludes Ms. Stewart. "On a daily basis, I can see change happening. I've seen people come in here often starting with nothing other than a shirt on their back; they're now employed and housed and come back to the café to be a positive mentor for other folks just starting the process. It's amazing to see how resilient people are."