Framingham: Volunteers pitch in on holiday meal for those facing challenges

At the SMOC and United Way holiday party at the Greater Framingham Community Church Monday, Framingham Police Sgt. Sean Riley shares a moment with Jaden Onwuakor, 5, whose mother, Juri Love, was playing Christmas music at the party. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman

By Danielle Ameden/Daily News Staff
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FRAMINGHAM – Christopher Cederman used to build houses, but said the physical toll of the work and a struggle with alcohol left him homeless.

Off and on, over the past 10 years, he found shelter by "riding couches," living in a tent or sleeping in the woods. And that kind of life, he said, "just makes you want to drink more."

Now sober and living in supported housing, Cederman was grateful Monday to receive a free hot meal, a warm hooded sweatshirt and some company at Christmas.

He was among the more than 100 people with hard-knock stories who came out for the South Middlesex Opportunity Council and United Way of Tri-County's annual holiday luncheon for the homeless at Greater Framingham Community Church.

"It's helping a lot of people, brings everyone together," Cederman said, his plate full of chicken, pasta, mashed potatoes and chocolate cake. "All these people volunteering — awesome. I love it."

In the church's fellowship hall, U.S. Rep. Katherine Clark was in charge of the potatoes and Town Manager Bob Halpin dished up mixed vegetables as volunteers served the lunch buffet-style.

"It's just nice that people actually care enough about us to do things like this," Dina Gould, 28, said as she waited in line.

Gould, a recovering heroin and alcohol addict, said she was homeless until her family got her into a detox program. She is now staying at SMOC's Serenity House in Hopkinton.

Jackie Murphy, who is also at Serenity House, lived on the streets while drinking and doing drugs. She said she has been sober now for five months. Murphy plans to cook a ham and turkey for herself and other women at the house who won't be with family on Christmas, but she was glad for Monday's meal.

"Very good for the holidays," she said.

During the party, pastor the Rev. J. Anthony Lloyd led the crowd in a prayer and a group sang carols.

Ron Gibson, 60, was happy to put on a Santa hat, sing along to "The 12 Days of Christmas" and fill up. A survivor of Hurricane Katrina, Gibson now lives in federally subsidized Section 8 housing.

"I'm feeling very grateful," he said as he ate.

United Way of Tri-County President Paul Mina, Police Chief Ken Ferguson, Sgt. Sean Riley, Selectmen Charlie Sisitsky and Cheryl Tully Stoll, Wayside Youth & Family Support Network CEO Eric Masi and other partners came for the party.

SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy said the event shows the power of community. "Sometimes we forget what a powerful force fellowship can be," Cuddy said. "This always reminds me that it's wonderful."

He shook hands with people leaving, saying, "You take care of yourself."

Elbert "Red" Browning, who lives in supported housing, said he will be alone on Christmas Day and appreciated "the meal, the fellowship and all."

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United Way's Ryan McCabe brings in more food for the buffet at the Greater Framingham Community Church Monday. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman

The Rev. J. Anthony Lloyd and SMOC's Jerry Desilets enjoy the festivities during the holiday party and lunch, sponsored by SMOC and the United Way of Tri-County at Rev. Lloyd's Greater Framingham Community Church. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman

Beth Connolly, left, and Michelle Mullin, both of SMOC, greet guests. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman

Serving, from left, Cristina Brennan; U.S. Rep. Katherine Clark; Framingham Town Manager Bob Halpin; and Framingham Selectman Cheryl Tully Stoll. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman