

Close call for the Living Room

Program cut but won't shut

BY TOM CARTER

ANGELS who built a reputation serving pancakes at St. Anthony's have stepped up to the plate to save a senior drop-in center at 350 McAllister that had been scheduled to close June 31.

The Living Room, a comfortable, daytime respite that features hot and cold breakfast, has served up to 80 seniors a day inside the 51-unit Madonna Residence since it opened nearly five years ago. In April, St. Anthony's stunned the homeless and low-income regulars – and the staff – by announcing its trustees were “rebalancing” its services and had decided to close the program.

A motley group of feisty seniors took the bad news hard. They went into the streets and to City Hall, telling a tale of woe to anyone who would listen and wishing for an angel to step in. Meanwhile, St. Anthony's had already reassigned the Living Room staff and planned to rent the space out.

The Secular Franciscans, a Catholic order of lay people who subscribe to Franciscan values but do not take religious vows, have agreed to take over the Living Room for a year, St. Anthony's Executive Director Father John Hardin told The Extra. Known as SFO, the 100-year-old order is devoted to the poor. This particular St. Boniface chapter, or “fraternity” of about 20, hosted a Sunday pancake breakfast for many years on the second floor at St. Anthony's.

“We were trying to figure out another way to keep the program,” Hardin said. “There was a real need. Now the Secular Franciscans have agreed to run it for a year and we'll then review it. We hope it will attract new and younger volunteers who want to do something for seniors.”

Living Room operations will be reduced starting in July from five days to Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The hours, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., will stay the same but staff will be cut from two full-time positions and a part-timer to one full-time.

“It's great, though it's not every day,” said Nancy Houk, Living Room coordinator. “People still have the family and can stay in touch.”

Started in 1987 in St. Anthony's old school, the Living Room moved around the neighborhood before settling in at the Madonna Residence – for poor women over 60 – in August 2000. And the commodious, high-ceiling space became a five-star respite to brighten the bleak days of drifting homeless and needy seniors. Its free hot and cold breakfasts, daily movies, cozy chairs and sofas for snoozing or socializing, plus a cheerful staff, made it a hit from day one. The occasional appearance of a live chamber music group, breaking up a CD diet of Kate Smith, Artie Shaw and Django Reinhardt, was just more frosting.

The seniors don't want for reading matter and puzzles, and there's always a crowd for the once-a-month birthday party with cake and ice cream. Movies are shown daily at 1 p.m., and impromptu discussion groups are almost as popular.

Slowly, the seniors found each other and became a community.

“Over time, you meet kindred spirits,” says regular Jim Scannell, 70, relaxing in a Living Room easy chair. “And it can get pretty cerebral around here.”

Scannell and two of his friends became a self-appointed rescue team to bring attention to the pending closing. Scannell wrote a letter to St. Anthony's trustees about the virtues of the Living Room and why it shouldn't be closed, then William Lindo, 62, and Bill Haas, 67, took it to the offices of Supervisor Daly, Mayor Newsom, Neighborhood Services and Rep. Nancy Pelosi. But the effort got no response. Daly, contacted by The Extra, thought the closing was a “rumor” but nonetheless vowed to do what he could “to preserve” the facility. “It's a regular stop for me, a beautiful place.”

The team was eager to hit the media with their plight. An Examiner story May 17 reported that the Living Room would close. Houk told The Extra she “commended” the team for their work.

St. Anthony's trustees were not closing the program to save money.

“We re-evaluate our programs every five years,” explained Hardin. “And our greatest need is senior housing.” St. Anthony's has 17 units of senior housing planned at 121 Golden Gate, but that won't be completed until 2010. “It's always painful to close a program that's needed, and I feel terrible about it. But I'm mandated by the trustees.”

Houk says 3 in 4 of the drop-ins are men and 1 in 3 is homeless. For many, it's as close to a home as they can expect anymore. By creating a community that cares for its members, they've satisfied a purpose of the Living Room, the staff says.

Every day, Wilma Cortez, 61, arrives for breakfast and stays till closing. Breakfast is an offering of hot oatmeal, cold cereals, bread, juices, coffee, tea, and peanut butter and jelly. Cortez said three weeks ago that if the Living Room closed she'd stay in her Mission Hotel room all day, going out only to the grocery.

“And there wouldn't be the socializing,” she said. “We hope and pray it'll be kept open.”

“If there was no food, they'd still come,” Houk says. “It's what they get from each other. And they do things for each other, look out for each other. What's more important than having people care for you?”

She tells the story of a now-bent-over, 91-year-old lady who lost her house in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, then lived in shelters and on the street. She was a Living Room regular, and some say the place kept her alive. A few months ago she showed up to bid farewell. She was going to live in a community outside of Seattle, as arranged by a relative.

“She had a new blouse on and came to say goodbye,” Houk said. “I gave her a kiss. It's too bad the TV cameras weren't here. There wouldn't be a dry eye anywhere. And even people who leave come back for visits.”

There are other programs for seniors, though none is a match. The San Francisco Senior Center at 481 O'Farrell has a lunch for \$1.50 and various activities but limited space in its lobby and TV room for hanging out or just snoozing. The Central YMCA senior center at nearby 220 Golden Gate wants seniors to buy \$35 annual memberships to access its exercise programs. And Canon Kip Senior Center at 705 Natoma is open the same hours, has a noon meal for a flexible \$1.50 but hanging out in its lunch room watching TV, they say, doesn't measure up to the Living Room's comfort or atmosphere.

Part of the Living Room attraction is that people feel safe there. Many say they are not apt to be hassled by young people, as can happen at soup kitchens. They tend to manifest their thanks in acts of kindness. One recent day a Living Room regular handed Houk \$3 in quarters. “Buy something for the place,” she said. And everybody pitches in, they say, though not quite like Larry Sang.

“The people here are nice to us,” says Sang, 66. “They give us what we want – and it's just a good place for people like us who have no place to go. We have a lot of people who are disabled, and they spill and drop things all over the place. And I like to see things clean.”

So, when 4 p.m. rolls around, Sang takes broom, mop and sponges and cleans the place top to bottom. He's done it for eight months.



LENNY LIMJOCO

Larry Sang pitches in daily to keep the Living Room clean.

“I've never worked for a group I liked better than St. Anthony's,” said Houk, who has run senior centers in Santa Cruz and Oakland. “And I am sort of caught in the middle here. But I think the loss of community would be the worst thing. How many families have this kind of closeness? I'd miss sitting around talking to them – it's like a general store here, and I've learned a lot. I look forward to coming here.”

Scannell and his friends hoped for an angel like Ted Deikel, the San Francisco-based venture capitalist who saved the city's senior escort program. Deikel's \$100,000 created the new Medical and Shopping Senior Escort Service, modeled after one he established in his hometown of Minneapolis.

What the Living Room regulars got now that SFO has stepped in is what everybody else in town is getting, a cutback. ■

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