

March Newsletter 2014

Taste the West Side

Steepletown's signature event, Taste the West Side, is coming up in just a couple weeks. The line-up of caterers is set: Fran from the Westsider Cafe, which is quickly becoming an icon on the Westside, is serving Irish stew. Chef Tommy Fitzgerald, Executive Director of Kitchen Sage, bring his talents with a fresh pasta bar. That Polish Girl Catering...well if it's the West Side, there's got to be soul food of the Polish kind-keilbasa, pierogis, and golumbki. And then there's Jimmy from Bodega San Marcos, who has an incredible gift at reminding us that Latino food is exotic. All this will be pleasantly garnished by the hands of one of Steepletown's GED graduates, who under the mentoring of Tommy Fitzgerald has launched his own catering business called Fetch.

For those out there who have never experienced the Taste, Judge Gardner offered "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." In her own words, she stated: "Looking forward to our favorite fundraiser of the year." If you are still not convinced you should attend, keep reading...

Some might call it coincidence, but I prefer to call it faith! You see, the Taste this year falls on the Feast Day of St. Joseph the Worker. For us Catholics this offers a reason to set aside the Lenten practice of fasting, as it is a major feast day recognized by the Church. This cannot even be said of St. Patrick's Day, which requires a Papal dispensation to enjoy the same reprieve from self-sacrifice. If I have not made the point clear enough, let it be said that you are able to eat and drink on this day to your heart's content without fearing the fires of eternal you-know-what.

While this winter has us ready to get out and have some fun, let me speak to the real reason for doing the Taste. Dazarion and Dazaria are the 3 month-old infant and two year-old toddler of two of the young adults connected with Steepletown. What Dazarion and Dazaria want most is a loving, caring family in which they can grow, play, learn, and call home. And their parents are trying to make a better life for each other and them. Dad has finished his GED through Steepletown, taking a longer path after starting a couple different times. He is now working but really wants to take his skills and aspirations to the next level and study to be an HVAC technician. Mom decided that it is now time for her to get her GED. Having two of her own children and with an interest in early childhood education, she is also working part-time with Steepletown's childcare and preschool. Reality check- this doesn't just happen! And this is just one young family...but Dazarion and Dazaria are extremely grateful!

So join us if you can on March 19th at the Goei Center if you can! Besides some incredible food, there will be a silent and live auction, the latter being very lively and fun. Valet parking will also be available that night. To get your tickets contact: E-mail dick@steepletown.org or call 451-4215, ext. 101.

St. Vincent dePaul

Over the past couple months I have been reflecting on the history, traditions and teachings of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul. In all humility I wish I would have come across this spiritual wisdom earlier in my leadership role at Steepletown. One of the first programs of Steepletown has been providing “emergency financial assistance” to those facing an eviction or loss of utilities. Twenty years later the need and number of requests for help have not diminished. So I find myself questioning the effectiveness of this approach to helping our neighbor in need. Giving to the poor, or to those who make poor choices and find themselves in need, will always be with us. Yet the spiritual wisdom embodied in the tradition and teachings of St. Vincent dePaul begins with this act of charity, but does not end there.

February 7th is the Feast Day of Blessed Rosalie Rendu, one of the co-founders of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul. Most of the credit for its founding is usually given to Frederic Ozanam. In 1833, during a time in France’s history when it was plagued by a revolution and extreme poverty, Frederic and his colleagues sought to prove the relevance of the Catholic faith. As they did not know how to work with the poor, they sought out Sr. Rosalie to teach them, who at that time was a Sister of Charity. Sr. Rosalie provided this small group of dedicated university students the understanding and tools to serve the poor. This work was soon organized into the Society of St. Vincent dePaul.

Her approach to serving the poor did not end with feeding, visiting and consoling them. In writings attributed to her, she states: “There are many ways of providing charity, the assistance of money or assistance in kind that we give to the poor will not last long. We must aspire to a more complete and longer lasting benefit: study their abilities, their level of education, and try to get them jobs to help them out of their difficulties.” Over the past couple years Steepletown’s efforts in serving the poor have moved in this direction of developing a person’s skills and resources to gain employment and become economically secure.

I also share this to offer a quick explanation of what happened to the West Side Garage Store. This was Steepletown’s second-hand store that operated for more than five years to provide job-training for youth but also to create a source of funding to support Steepletown’s work. An opportunity presented itself last spring to join our efforts with the local Society of St. Vincent dePaul, which also operates a second-hand store on Division Avenue, just south of Hall Street. The result was the closing of the West Side Garage Store, and one of Steepletown’s staff being hired to manage the St. Vincent dePaul Store.

Launching New Careers

On February 3rd and 4th Restorers Business Partnership, LAUNCH Chattanooga, and the DeVos Family Foundations hosted a training on entrepreneurship for representatives from several non-profits in the Grand Rapids area. The two day training was facilitated by staff from LAUNCH Chattanooga, a non-profit that trains and empowers Chattanooga residents from under served communities to create their own businesses.

Representatives from area non-profits learned how to teach and implement the training into their own programs. The curriculum covers a ten week training in which participants are taught the many components to starting a business. Participants are encouraged to brainstorm, test and re-work their ideas with the help of a facilitator/coach who mentors them all the way through the process. A training using the LAUNCH curriculum will be hosted by Restorers Business Partnership here in Grand Rapids in March. Steepletown hopes to send at least two participants to this training and serve as a guide while they are creating their businesses.

The mission of LAUNCH Chattanooga is to empower people to achieve their goals and attain self-sufficiency. Steepletown hopes to assist young people in reaching these same goals. Steepletown seeks to empower youth in obtaining educational and occupational success that will give them a sense of achievement and will allow them to stand on their own. The LAUNCH curriculum can be a powerful tool in Steepletown's programing by giving youth the opportunity to really take ownership of their path to success.

La Plaza Comunitaria

The 2010 Census demonstrates that Latinos comprise more than half the growth nationwide and are now 16.3 percent of the population, up from 12.5 percent in 2000; from 35.3 million to 50.5 million Latinos in the U.S. While Latinos represent the largest minority group in the U.S., they have the lowest rates of educational attainment. 44 percent of Latinos fall below a basic literacy rate with another 30 percent having only basic literacy which is defined as being able to perform only simple daily literacy activities. (U.S. Dept. of Educ. 2010). Only 41 percent have completed high school.

The Latino population in the U.S., and particularly here in West Michigan, face many challenges in obtaining decent employment. With barriers of language, educational attainment, and legal status, Latinos/as in the U.S. have the lowest median income and their children have the highest drop-out rate of any ethnic group. It is difficult to break this cycle of poverty when nearly half of Latino adults are not at a level of basic literacy and another third only have basic literacy skills.

The Plaza Comunitaria began in the Spring of 2011 as a collaboration between the Latino Community Coalition, the Mexican Consulate, GVSU, and Steepletown to address these realities. The Plaza is held at the Steepletown Center, and offers educational programs that address all levels of academic skill attainment. Basic computer classes are also offered at the Plaza as testing to complete coursework is done on-line. Studies show adult students learn English more quickly as a result of literacy gains in their own language, which is one of the goals of the Plaza. It also gives parents the ability to be more involved in their children's education, which increases graduation rates. The ultimate goal is for participants of the Plaza to secure better employment.

The Plaza is always in need of adult volunteers who can tutor one-on-one or teach a small group of students. One of the criteria though is that you need to be able to communicate fluently in Spanish, or close enough. Contact Celia Lopez at 451-4215, ext. 121.

For more information on our Program, visit our blog <http://laplazacomunitariagr.blogspot.com/>