

Beans & Bread makes holiday season festive

By Chaz Muth

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The holidays used to be Matthew Brown's favorite time of the year. But since the 26-year-old Baltimorean became homeless, the approaching season hasn't seemed so bright.

However, when he learned that Beans & Bread (the Fells Point soup kitchen where he dines daily) was going to hold weekly holiday activities on three consecutive Tuesdays and one Wednesday through Advent – in addition to the Christmas Day feast – his spirits were lifted.

"I was thinking it was just going to be another day, but this means I can actually do some of the things I've always loved about the Christmas season," Mr. Brown said with a smile growing on his face. "I'm starting to get a little excited about it now."

With clients who don't have homes to decorate, a place to bake or a spot to put up a tree, the staff and volunteers at St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore's Beans & Bread will invite the homeless to help them decorate the dining room and resource center, garnish Christmas cookies and sing carols, make holiday crafts, and partake in the "gift mall" as they choose presents for themselves and their families, said Kathleen Spain, director of the Bond Street facility.

The Tuesday events will be held 2-4 p.m. with Deck the Halls on Nov. 27, Cookies & Carols Dec. 4 and Christmas Crafts Dec. 11.

"The Season of Giving" will be held Dec. 19 from noon-3 p.m. as the homeless receive packages and choose gifts for their family members and the Christmas meal will be served Dec. 25 from 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

"Beans & Bread has always

been a close-knit community, so it's natural for us to provide a festive environment," Ms. Spain said. "For a lot of our clients, this place is the closest thing they have to a 'It's natural for us to provide a festive environment.'

– Kathleen Spain

home. We want them to be involved with the decorating, as well as have the same kind of festive activities that happen in the homes of a lot of people during the season."

On the day the homeless will be invited to decorate Christmas cookies, the St. Frances Academy, Baltimore, choir will be at the soup kitchen to help lead the caroling, said Sue Elias, resource coordinator for Beans & Bread, and a parishioner of St. Pius X, Rodgers Forge.

"While the clients really benefit from the holiday activities, the volunteers get so much out of this, too," Ms. Elias said. "They get a chance to donate and put together the hats, gloves, (lip balm) and warm socks for the winter survival kits and then give them out. They also get a chance to interact with the people. They get a chance to get to know the people they are actually helping out."

Programs that help the homeless and poor – like Beans & Bread, Our Daily Bread and Sarah's Hope in Rosedale – get an influx of volunteers and donations during the holiday season, she said.

Sarah's Hope also will be having holiday celebrations Dec. 18-22.

The holidays can be a hard time emotionally for people with homes, and the stress of being homeless only compounds that feeling of loneliness some experience, Ms. Spain said.

"Our goal is to make this a joyous time for our clients, staff and volunteers," she said. "We want this to be a time when we can all come together, enjoy the season and enjoy each other."

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Romy Data (left) and Charles Harvin stock shelves in the pantry at Beans and Bread Outreach Center in Fells Point.

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