

“We believe, here at MCC, that the work that Esther’s Pantry has been doing for so many years is such a vital work that the community can’t allow it to go by the wayside,” says the Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, which took over responsibility for the longtime nonprofit on March 1.

Esther’s Pantry, a community mainstay, provides groceries to those living with AIDS. It is named after Esther Hoffman Howard, the 24th empress of Portland’s Imperial Rose Court.

Esther, a k a Chester Brinker, was a popular and charismatic figure when he died of AIDS-related complications in 1984—a time when the AIDS crisis was beginning to take its toll.

The night Brinker died, Portland bar J.R.’s West held a drag show and raised more than \$900 to help his parents with medical bills. But his parents didn’t accept the money for their own use; instead, they returned the dollars to the community.

Brinker’s mother reportedly said it was her son’s wish that others with AIDS receive financial help. Thus, out of this wish sprouted the Brinker Fund, which became a trust of Cascade AIDS Project in 1986 and helped people living with AIDS pay rent and utilities.

As the Brinker Fund board members visited clients, they quickly realized that, in addition to housing-related support, many needed food.

Hence the establishment of Esther’s Pantry. (The gay and lesbian Catholic group known as Dignity jump-started the pantry with a successful food drive in 1986. It wasn’t long before the pantry became a main focus of the trust.)

In 1991, Esther’s Pantry received nonprofit



PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

## HELPING HAND Giving organization will continue good works

by Pat Young

status with the state of Oregon. At first, the pantry was located in a board member’s garage. But as the AIDS crisis grew, so did the need for more food and storage space.

Fortunately, the Old Town gay bar Embers Avenue came to the rescue by donating space in its basement. From there, Esther’s Pantry moved a few times until it landed at its current location at 310 N.W. Broadway. And now it is getting ready to shift to 2761 N.E. Halsey St.—a move that will save \$4,600 a year in rent.

When Cole heard talk that Esther’s Pantry was closing due to administrative burnout, he offered to speak with the pantry’s board to see if MCC could run the organization.

After several discussions, he says, an agreement was reached allowing MCC to do just that.

MCC has a congregation of almost 300 members, and Cole says many of them are looking for ways to help the community. Esther’s Pantry may be just the good-works ticket.

The board members of Esther’s Pantry and

many clients are content with the change, but some people have expressed concerns.

“They think Roy is going to be preaching a sermon when they come to get their food,” explains Derrick LePak, an Esther’s Pantry board member.

“That will definitely not happen,” stresses Cole. “There won’t be any religious overtones. Esther’s Pantry is not a vehicle to be used to coerce other people into becoming part of this church.”

Cole says MCC’s immediate goals include ensuring the transition happens smoothly and without an interruption of pantry services, maintaining the pantry’s funding streams, and attracting volunteers.

At Esther’s Pantry, meanwhile, LePak and others are getting ready for the move.

LePak is the main man. He doesn’t have an official title, but everyone knows he keeps things running, and people go to him with their questions and concerns.

After starting out as a client in the early

Esther’s Pantry board member Derrick LePak has got the goods

1990s, LePak grew more involved with the organization and evolved into this overseer role. Among other things, he picks up the groceries and interviews potential clients.

Currently the pantry has about 170 clients. Most are gay men, but there are also straight folks, women and children. It’s the kids who have really touched LePak’s heart. They’ve drawn pictures for him, which he proudly displays on the file cabinet by his desk.

Over the years, LePak has seen happy moments, but mainly sad times, as so many clients have passed away.

He talks of the more upbeat occasions when various organizations raised money for the pantry, especially the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court.

He says one year the court raised more than \$8,000. The court, gay bars, Rosetown Ramblers and others have raised money and collected food via dances, bingo, haircuts and shoeshines, roller-skating, and bowling.

Then there are the people who clip coupons from the newspaper and drop off extra items at the pantry.

“There is actually a full community—a city community out there instead of this little one that is HIV/AIDS-positive that keeps things going,” LePak says of the various contributors. “It’s not one big thing, it’s a whole bunch of little things.”

■ ESTHER’S PANTRY will keep the same hours: 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays. The last day at the downtown location is Thursday, March 30; the first day at the new address is Thursday, April 6.

PAT YOUNG is a Portland-based free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.

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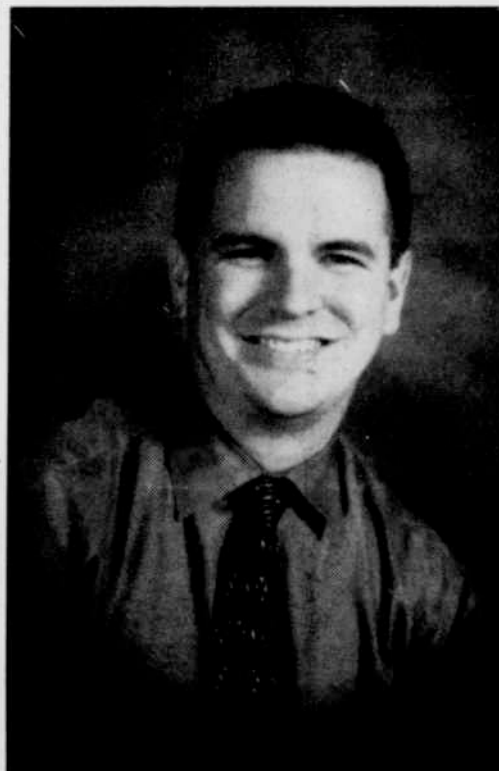
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