



Stephanie Opoka in her pantry at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Order out of chaos

BY ROBIN SCHAUFFLER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's 4:45 on a Wednesday afternoon, and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church at Southwest 13th Avenue and Clay Street hums with activity. A young woman carries a 10-pound sack of ground coffee from a cramped storeroom down a narrow hall to the kitchen

where five young people, arms covered in tattoos, are in various stages of food prep. A tall slim guy in a black-laced corset of burgundy satin strikes a pose near the stove. There's hardly room for all their elbows in there, but somehow they fit.

People are

gathering for dinner in the Parrish Hall, worn-down bags and backpacks piled beside them. Two men have brought small wire cages; they let their cats out to relax on the tables, leashed and collared. The men stroke the kitties and whisper to them. A black German shepherd nearby rests chin on paws, ignoring the cats. There's conversation, bustle, a sense of expectancy. This is "Cooks' Supper," when local chefs offer cooking classes and prepare a

meal with the group called The Underground — homeless youth, ages 16 to 22.

The Outreach Minister, Paul Davis, dashes from one group to another, eyes bright with enthusiasm, welcoming all, asking questions, keeping things lively. He knows everyone's name. He's the engine, the energy, that drives the whole operation, continually expanding what's offered, recruiting new partners, raising the funds that keep it going. He laughs easily, cares deeply, dreams big. He proudly points out his latest triumph: Signs in Mandarin, written by Hosford Middle School language students, labeling the different food areas so the elders from the nearby apartments can now read them.

Tomorrow is Last Thursday Food Pantry, when the Parrish Hall becomes a free grocery store. In the basement a neat mountain of cardboard boxes stands organized, labeled and ready for the day.

Stephanie Opoka, shoulder-length blond hair framing pink cheeks, moves through this scene like a small steady tugboat in a busy harbor, expecting other craft to bustle out of her way — she throws a word here and there, gruff but kind, nods to one, laughs at another's joke. This afternoon, she's dressed neatly in white blouse and tan slacks — when she's working, she's in a sleeveless t-shirt and jeans, hair firmly tied back out of the way.

Stephanie is the pantry manager for Clay Street Table, the outreach program of St. Stephen's. She runs the Food Pantry,

maintains the supplies that support the weekly schedule of different meals, and manages the diverse volunteers.

St. Stephen's sits at the edge of downtown Portland, neighbor to a variety of other service agencies, subsidized apartments and Interstate 405. The Table's mission is open-armed: "to feed those who are hungry in body and in spirit." It's the "in spirit" part that matters most, Paul is quick to explain. Anyone who's hungry may enter this welcoming space and find a kind word and some sort of meal every day of the week, and then be invited to help cook, or serve, or mop the floor, and become part of a community. It isn't just about food — there's a deeper hunger to address.

This is the key to Clay Street Table's character: so many of the volunteers come in first as clients. Most are homeless — singles, couples, some families; others are elders in nearby HUD housing, many of whom do not speak English. Paul refers to all of them as "guests," or "friends," not clients. Among other volunteers are teens and pre-teens from local schools, groups of college students on work-study programs and members of seven or eight different faith communities. These volunteers, who go home to warm beds every night, are also "friends." Stephanie's steady hand keeps them all organized.

Stephanie has no written job description.

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For more information on what Clay Street Table provides, or on becoming a Table volunteer, contact The Rev. Dor. Paul Davis: Paul@ClayStreetTable.org; (503)449-4969. Or just show up at the door: 1432 SW 13th Avenue

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a revolution which has to start with each one of us."

Dorothy Day

The *Revolutions of the Heart* series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day: "The greatest challenge of the day is: How to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." (*Leaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement*)