

Tix on sale for Cherry Blossom Theatre Fest

The Salem Theatre Network will be hosting the Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival, a city-wide event in downtown Salem March 17 through 19.

The festival will feature 20 performances, five workshops, six of Salem's downtown theatre venues, exclusive wine and beer tasting, and passports and prizes.

A one act competition will feature performers from Beaverton Civic Theater, Gallery Theater and Pentacle Theater. Four area theater companies, including Keizer Homegrown Theater, have performances slated. Workshop topics include acting auditions, tools for devised performances, directing actors, nailing mass auditions and body awareness on the stage.

A River City Rock Academy performance will close out the weekend.

Passes for the entire weekend are available to purchase at salemtheatrenetwork.org. There are discount passes for students with a special educational track, and there are VIP passes for adults with wine and beer tastings.

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landlord and we need more of those."

IHN receives federal Housing and Urban Development grants to help homeless families get back on their feet. Executive Director TJ Putman said the organization has a 96 percent success rate in transitioning families to more stable living environments.

Each week, an IHN church opens up its doors to homeless families who eat dinner, spend the evening there and then have breakfast before returning to the IHN day site in west Salem to prepare for school and work. Keizer's Salem Mennonite Church and Church of Je-

sus Christ of Latter Day Saints are supporting congregations, but do not host. Families must have children to be part of the program.

As families progress through IHN's continuum of care, they can eventually qualify for housing assistance that covers security deposits and assists with rent payment. The families themselves contribute a minimum of \$50 and as much as a third of their income depending on their resources. It costs about \$3,500 per family to make the leap from homelessness to their own living space.

While federal grants pay for some of the most essential aspects of the program, volunteers at each church supply the backbone that makes it possible.

St. Edward has been hosting families for 17 years, and three of the present-day volunteers, Corky and Letha Caron and Mary Hancock, have been there from the start.



KEIZERTIMES/ERIC A. HOWARD
Corky Caron fixes a plate of food for an IHN visitor at St. Edward Catholic Church.

"One of the first things we did was an exercise where we had \$800 and we had to figure out how we would budget and live our lives. It really got us thinking," Letha said.

The program was quite a bit different then, families in need didn't yet have all the services the program now offers, but much of it hasn't changed.

Before families arrive, Corky and Letha help move the beds and furniture from the previous church to St. Edward and then set up living spaces for the families in four classrooms where the families will stay.

"That's one of the things that's different with St. Edward. Each family has their own private space. In other churches, they are sometimes in one big room with partitions," Letha said.

There are about 80 available volunteer shifts for the week, but Letha said the same people sign up year after year to help out with the effort. In an average year, St. Edward will host three times for about 15 people or four families. Last week, the nearly 10 children at St. Edward ranged in age from 8 months to mid-teens.

Volunteers provide a variety of assistance ranging from meal preparation and clean-up to ministry.

Corky does his best, after serving up food, to visit with families and lift spirits - often encouraging them to eat more at the same time. Meals themselves are given more thought than one might expect, the result of a decree from Corky.

"The families end up eating a lot of pasta at the other churches, and when we heard that Corky decided there would be no pasta at St. Edward," Letha said.

Chicken parmesan was the featured meal during the *Keizertimes*' visit. Another volunteer serves up Mexican-inspired cuisine every Friday the church hosts.

"We try to follow Jesus's path in helping people. That's my motivation," said volunteer Annie Chan.

That path can be fraught with moments of joy and tears. It might mean encouraging a teary, anxiety-fraught visitor out of their room to have a meal. It might also mean bearing witness to acts of kindness no one would believe if they hadn't seen it themselves.

"One night, we had a family that didn't have a car and one of our volunteers had an extra car and they gave it to the family. That was a tearful night," Hancock said.

While the program is by-and-large a success, forces outside IHN can have an impact on what the program is able to

do. Ryan Chytka, along with his wife and three children, have been moving from church to church for two months. It's been tough to find a stable place that can accommodate the family's size.

"Rent's just gone so crazy and there's been nothing in our allotted amount," said Chytka. "We have back-up plans but nothing set in stone. It's still a gummy worm."

Chytka dropped out of high school to take a job on a logging crew when he was a teenager.

"My first check was \$2,500 and I was 16 years old. I thought, 'Who needs school?'" he said.

He and his family were living in LaPine last year when he was involved in a four-wheeler accident that left him struggling to perform simple tasks like speaking.

"It scrambled the egg pretty good," he said.

Still, he and his wife were on track to purchase their own home until the deal fell through and they were given 60 days notice. With five mouths to feed, the family quickly spent down their nest egg and other family members encouraged them move back over the mountains.

"We tried to get established in McMinnville, but nothing was happening and then my wife's mother heard about this program, so we signed up," Chytka said.

He would love to find work that is still within his capabilities, especially given that getting approved for disability might take years.

"I'm willing to do anything so we can get on our feet," Chytka said. "It's tested our will, but my wife and I are trying to stay strong for each other and our kids."

Chytka and his family can apply for extensions to stay in the IHN program, but he was unsure what progress had been made on their application.

Unfortunately, need is also on the rise. Putman said IHN has seen a 31 percent increase in requests for services in the past year and has had to turn away 40 to 50 families each month.

Despite those challenges, Corky is a stalwart believer in what IHN is capable of doing for a family in a crisis.

"About seven or eight years after we started, one of the first families we hosted saw (Letha and I) coming out of Fred Meyer. They came up and thanked us and told us they were completely self-sufficient now. I turned to Letha and said if that's the only family help out of doing all this, it's totally worth it," Corky said.

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