

KN KHANIQA H NIMATULLAHI

“Why do we call the formerly homeless our friends?”

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Volunteers and supporters smiling during Sunday brunches. Clockwise from top: Mary smiling as usual as she serves salad and Moroccan dishes; volunteers on the final Sunday working together in the kitchen and enjoying each other’s company (with Mickey cheerfully doing the dishes!); Finette taking a break from her work to enjoy a slice of pizza with the volunteers and our friends.

What happened this February?

[Life] consists not in seeing visions and in dreaming dreams, but in active charity and in willing service.

Henry Longfellow,
American poet

February was a very busy month for us all! We started the month with a Superbowl party featuring, at the request of our friends, pizza and popcorn, as well as Moroccan dishes and salad. Yasin, Mary, and Mark were among the volunteers serving lunch on Superbowl Sunday.

The second Sunday of February brought many challenges for us and our friends. Much of Massachusetts was in a state of emergency due to the snow. The streets and sidewalks were covered in ice and snow, making walking very risky. The MBTA shut down, and it was very difficult to find safe parking spaces. Many volunteers were unable to attend, and the shopping was difficult— that Saturday evening, there was only one convenience store open in Back Bay!

However, the dangerous snow and ice brought a sense of urgency and community. The volunteers who helped showed true, admirable dedication to our friends. Special thanks to Maya and Laleh Jon, who made deliveries to the House of Sufism despite sickness and difficulties traveling, and to Dr. Gibbes and Jack for donating clothes. Thanks to Fatima, Mark, and Jansu, who came to serve lunch despite the poor conditions. Fatima left her house at 6:45 AM, took a taxi that cost \$100, and worked until almost 9:00 PM.

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Some of our friends' reactions to our third Sunday brunch of the month:

"Wonderful- the toast and jam was marvelous."

"I have not had such a fresh, rich cup of coffee recently."

"It was definitely one of the most enjoyable Sunday brunches ever!"

The charity that is a trifle to us can be precious to others.

Homer

Updates, continued

The dedication did not go unnoticed by our friends. When we arrived to serve lunch, a number of our friends were waiting to get the door for us. One of them exclaimed, "you came with this snow!" Our friends were very generous during this difficult time. One was looking outside to open the door promptly and make sure we wouldn't have to wait outside. Another watched our parked car during brunch service. With such care and love from volunteers and friends, there was an atmosphere of togetherness and unity as we ate our delicious meal: toast, hash browns, basmati rice, meat, macaroni, and many vegetables including a Japanese-style vegetable dish.

The next Sunday brunch was a great success. We were joined by Jansu, James, and a volunteer from Florida. Our menu featured very healthy vegetarian options such as salad, green beans, veggie burgers, and a roasted vegetable dish with eggplant, zucchini, red pepper, celery, onion, cheese, and breadcrumbs. A vegetarian friend was very excited that the entire menu was vegetarian. One friend works from 4 AM to 7 PM. They commented, "after such long weekdays, I certainly can use such gourmet food on Sundays!" The day ended with Finette playing bingo with the residents.

We had many volunteers on the final Sunday: Mark, Ali, Mickey, Jansu, Ezra (from Guatemala), Edmin (from Beaverbrook STEP), Ted, and Sean, a student at Boston College High School. We had a delicious breakfast, including oatmeal with apples, cinnamon, butter, honey, and brown sugar. For lunch, we ate rice with green beans and ground meat, salad, and homemade yogurt. One friend was very excited to try homemade yogurt for the first time.

Why do we call the formerly homeless our friends?

We visit every Sunday, even when the weather is harsh and we lack transportation, and we have developed truly caring friendships with those with whom we share lunch. The initiative is driven by passion and caring for our friends. The residents of this building may be formerly homeless, but that doesn't stop us from sharing love with each other.

In America, as in many countries, there are many prejudices against the poor, and especially the homeless. There is a common idea that many homeless people use drugs, or are otherwise to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves. People often treat the poor as nothing more than a drain on a society's resources. Some people even think that we shouldn't "waste time" with our formerly homeless friends. At best, these views offer highly selective interpretations of certain facts, interpretations that favor our impulses to blame others at the expense of our equally natural impulses to recognize the humanity we share with the homeless.

Those who find themselves homeless in America are very often victims of circumstance who, regardless of whatever choices they have made, have had much to contribute to the nation at other times. For example, it may be a surprise that many of our friends are veterans. Before 1991, there was no transition assistance program for people moving between military and civilian lives. Most of the skills learned in the military are not easily transferable to the job market in the US. Many soldiers develop post-traumatic stress disorder or other such afflictions. Veterans make up only 9% of the total US population, but represent more than 15% of its homeless population and are more likely to remain homeless longer and have more serious health problems (New York Times, 11/8/2011). If these statistics about homelessness among veterans aren't jarring enough, we would also do well to bear in mind the troubling number of homeless children. As of 2011, the National Center on Family Homelessness estimated that 1.6 million or (1 in 45) children were homeless in our country (America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness, National Center on Family Homelessness).

Such negative stereotypes are, in fact, not universal. In many cultures, the homeless are almost seen as holy: to help them is a very spiritual and respectable act— after all, most of the world's religions enjoin charity in one form or another. For example, the Qur'an directs believers to feed the poor before themselves (Qur'an 4:36). Similarly, in the New Testament, we read: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (John 3:17-18). And lest these examples make charity seem too foreign, we should remember that the US is, according to the World Giving Index, the most charitable country in the world (Huffington Post, 12/19/2011).



Volunteers lined up and serving lunch to our friends with expressions of focus and dedication on their faces.

Perspectives of the formerly homeless

and

A letter from our friends

Our friends are in great need. During the state of emergency in Boston because of the snowstorm, many of our friends lacked proper food. Mohammad asked some of our friends about their experience of hunger – what did they eat during the snowstorm this February? Here are some of their responses.

“Coffee in the morning. I don't have an appetite in the evening.”

“I went to Dunkin Donuts.”

“I don't have an appetite at all. I go to the Western Hotel sidewalk, looking for extinguished cigarettes.”

“I go to food courts to eat from trash cans or leftovers on tables if the police don't kick me out.”

One friend approached Mohammad to say, “I represent the residents. Food is important to us. Your service should continue.”

This month, we received a kind letter from the residents. It read:

“We would kindly like to extend our gratitude for the kindness your volunteers have reached out to us, to cook and serve us each and every Sunday afternoon.

“We do acknowledge and appreciate the time and effort you all share with us, and therefore affix our names and signatures in thanksgiving and prayers that your volunteers should continue being a blessing to us each and every Sunday for brunch.

“Thank you all kindly for your undivided attention to this very important matter. We are looking forward to you coming every Sunday to start the week with us. Again, thank you.”

The letter was presented during a discussion of the brunch program over coffee and freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Our friends expressed their gratitude for the reliability and continuity of our program, as well as the socialization it brings them, “charging their battery for the week”. Of course, the pleasure is ours as well!

How to get involved

1: Volunteer! It is a time commitment of only two hours: 2-4 PM on Sundays. Help us cook and clean or just spend time with our friends!

2: Monetary donations: If you would like to make a contribution to the House of Sufism Charity Initiative, you can write a check (payable to KN), use any credit card, or wire money through PayPal. All your donations are tax-deductible.

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