

Quarles & Brady partner leads effort to serve city's homeless

By Jamie Loo, Law Bulletin Staff Writer
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On a clear, cool Tuesday night, a line forms along the sidewalk in front of a folding table behind a loading dock near Belmont Avenue and Halsted Street.

The small crowd gathered there grows louder as they talk, laugh and greet old friends. There are teenagers bantering about someone's love interest, an elderly man on crutches, a few middle-aged women chatting about the news of the day and a father and son.

Meanwhile, Janine M. Landow-Esser is busy with final preparations at the table.

The Quarles & Brady LLP partner gingerly sets down two shopping bags filled with homemade brownies, oatmeal and red velvet cookies packaged in individual sandwich bags. Shimmering stacks of turkey and cheese sandwiches in aluminum foil sit next to boxes of fruit.

Landow-Esser removes the top of a tall, round, red cooler and tosses a taco salad of lettuce, vegetables and crushed tortilla chips with a long serving spoon.

The line begins to move.

"Taco salad?" she asks a woman with a full scoop of salad ready.

"Oh, that sounds good," the woman replies in a tone that is both excited and relieved in the same breath.

"Yeah, we've got all kinds of good stuff tonight," Landow-Esser says with a smile.

It could be the scene of a neighborhood street festival in the summer — except that there is only one vendor and no money exchanges hands here tonight.

As the crowd moves closer to the table, their large backpacks and arms weighed down by multiple shopping bags becomes more clear.

Some drag worn suitcases or wire folding shopping carts behind them packed with everything that is precious to them and will help them survive another day. Despite whatever hardship they're facing, many are cheerful and appreciative to have a meal and enjoy the company of other people.

Landow-Esser is a volunteer with the Night Ministry, a nondenominational nonprofit which helps homeless adults and at-risk youths through street outreach, housing and health-care initiatives.

For the past nine years, she has done more than just serve food on the street. She has recruited dozens of volunteers.

The Night Ministry recognized Landow-Esser with its President's Award at its awards dinner and auction this month. To her, it's more than an honor; it's recognition of all of the volunteers she works with through Anshe Emet Synagogue in Lakeview and at her law firm.

"I like that they (Night Ministry) are right there in the trenches serving people where their needs are," Landow-Esser said. "It's all about the clients not about some other agenda."

Rallying the troops

After hearing a presentation on the Night Ministry at Anshe Emet, Landow-Esser volunteered to coordinate the congregation's efforts with the nonprofit.

She does it all over e-mail, making monthly checks with her list of 60 rotating volunteers who shop for groceries, prepare meals and serve the food. Most participate in just one part of this process, and another group takes the baton to help finish the job.

The shoppers arrive at Landow-Esser's home and unload the food, which



often includes homemade baked goods from other volunteers. Another group prepares the meal, and after loading up Landow-Esser's car, she meets with the volunteers who do the onsite food service.

Rain or shine, they will be there.

The Night Ministry works in several neighborhoods ranging from Uptown on the North Side to Greater Grand Crossing on the South Side. The food line is set up alongside the nonprofit's outreach van or health and wellness bus, which provides basic acute care, HIV testing, diabetes counseling and referrals.

Five years ago, Landow-Esser got Quarles & Brady involved with the Night Ministry as part of the firm's Quarles Cares program, which focuses on community education and hunger issues. Along with clothing drives and fundraisers, attorneys and staff volunteer for the food service quarterly, preparing the meals in their downtown office and then going out to serve it.

As a regular volunteer for the food service and a Night Ministry donor, Quarles & Brady partner Patrick J. Bitterman said Landow-Esser is so welcoming and makes the Night Ministry's clients feel respected.

She is very mindful of food preferences and suggests to volunteer shoppers the types of food visitors will get excited about. She also knows how to politely control the crowd when visitors start asking for seconds before everybody has been served once.

"Janine is very good about making sure the process works in a friendly way," Bitterman said. "You just never get an argument. People happily engage in the routine."

Beyond her synagogue and law firm, Landow-Esser's enthusiasm also spread to her husband's job at the Government Finance Officers Association, which collects donated toiletries after large conferences and brings any excess food from the

meetings to the Night Ministry's Response Ability Pregnant and Parenting Program.

Night Ministry youth outreach Rabbi Menachem Cohen said the nonprofit relies on hundreds of volunteers like Landow-Esser. One time she invited him to give a presentation at her home to a group of international students, and afterward, they made sandwiches together and delivered them to a Night Ministry shelter.

"She has a huge heart and really cares about the work we're doing. She has done a really good job rallying the troops," Cohen said.

"We're so thankful for people like Janine."

Just like you and me

After everyone has been through the line once, they are welcome to come back for more. The volunteers always prepare enough food for 200 people, and the menu rotates during the year with hot meals in the winter and lighter fare in the warmer months.

For many of the Night Ministry clients, it's their first meal in a day or more. An extra sandwich or piece of fruit is a lifesaver that may help someone get through another day.

"We try to be really generous with seconds and thirds," she said. "We basically keep serving until we run out of food."

Many clients have been coming by for years, so Landow-Esser often sees familiar faces and learns snippets of people's lives. It's hard to hear stories from teens with nowhere to sleep at night, she said, and see pregnant mothers trying to make it on their own. Landow-Esser has also encountered families with children as young as 4.

Some youths she has met are around for a year or two and then disappear. Landow-Esser said she usually doesn't know what has happened to them and hopes their absence means they've

moved on to a stable living situation or have reunited with their families.

Many young clients are homeless because of their sexual orientation and have been rejected by their families.

"When they're not there any more, you miss them," she said. "But, on the other hand, you just hope that life has gotten better for them."

Along with the mysteries are also some success stories.

Some clients come back to share news such as landing a first job or finding a place to live.

"They (the homeless) are just like you and me and they live in our neighborhoods," she said. "That's why I like to be out there trying to help in my little small way."

As 10 p.m. nears, the crowd is dwindling.

A young man approaches the table and asks if he can take some extra food for some friends. A volunteer helps him load a bag with sandwiches and a few desserts.

After some gentle teasing and motherly insistence from Landow-Esser to "take something healthy," he adds a few pieces of fruit to the bag.

"I like your spirit," he exclaims with glee, clasping Landow-Esser's hand as he leans forward to kiss it. "Pleased to meet ya' sunshine. Thank you for what you do."

Landow-Esser is flattered at the gesture and beams a bright smile back.

It's dark now. But on Halsted this night, some rays of light linger.