

Top Hunger Stories IN THE NEWS

FEEDING
AMERICA

Lou Martelli, Media Relations Manager of the Food Bank of South Jersey, shared a recent post he wrote for his blog:

Mission Moments

March 17, 2016

I had not stepped into the cafeteria at Sacred Heart in South Camden since graduating in 1971, the last of six children in my family to pass through the elementary school.

Tricia Yeo, FBSJ's Healthy Living Initiative Coordinator, had invited me there. She wanted me to observe the final class of Cooking Matters, a nutrition education course she was teaching to a dozen or so Sacred Heart students.

Tricia told me that these kids were a great group, and thought they'd make worthy subjects for a newsletter story. She was right. The kids, ages 8 through 13, were inquisitive and outgoing – proud to show what they had been learning from Tricia and her assistants the prior six weeks.

I watched them work together to prep and cook a four-course meal. Then they all sat down and enjoyed the meal together. Lots of laughing, lots of smiles, lots of teasing and goofing around. Kid stuff.

Kid stuff isn't something that always comes easy in Camden.

I grew up five blocks from Sacred Heart. Throughout my youth my parents struggled to make ends meet.

Our homelife was compromised by my father's mental health. During his dark times, my mother scrambled to secure our basics, turning to relatives for help and to the government on occasion for food assistance. I shared a 10' x 11' rowhouse bedroom with two brothers. I learned not to expect much; I knew not to ask for much.

Camden's streets were uncertain places as well. The city whose manufacturing engine raced during the forties and fifties barely sputtered by the time I was a boy, spawning joblessness, blight, and corner drug cultures.

But life at Sacred Heart, that was different. I thrived in its structure, felt safe in its hallways. And I loved that bandbox of a cafeteria. It's where I bonded daily with classmates who have become life-long friends. It's where I traded milk for jello, where lunch ladies slipped me bonus fish sticks, where we would plan tomorrow's recess games and fixate on year-end class trips to "exotic" destinations like Hershey Park or the Statue of Liberty. It was a place to simply be.

Forty five years later, that cafeteria was still a haven. I got to sit and speak with a handful of the Sacred Heart kids as they were eating. They told me how much they had enjoyed Cooking Matters and that they were sorry the classes were ending. They wanted to learn more, to try more things. One boy said he wanted to become a chef. I believed all of them.

Reconnecting to Sacred Heart as part of the Food Bank of South Jersey and interacting with those kids sparked reflection. I sure saw plenty of myself in them. The experience helped me to better appreciate the extended community that nurtured me way back then – dedicated teachers and caring neighbors (so many of them) that made learning and growth possible, and subsequently, life opportunities.

For two decades of my professional career, I worked in communications roles for mid-sized corporations, where eyes were always on earnings and investments were measured quarterly. I wrote about the wonders of network technology for those companies. How refreshing to have this chance now, later in life, to be part of an organization that invests for the long term, in the health and hopes of children.

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