

Project Downtown caters sandwiches and souls

By: Carmel Delshad

TAMPA—Muslim students at the University of South Florida are reaching out to the homeless of Tampa through Project Downtown, a service organization offering food and friendship every Friday.

A Growing Issue

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development mandates a census of each county's homeless population every other year during the last week of January. The Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County reports that there were 9,532 homeless men, women and children on the day their homeless census was completed in April 2007, 72 percent of which were in downtown Tampa.

The results for the 2007 census showed a decrease in numbers but officials for the Homeless Coalition warned that the cold and rainy weather was a major reason for a the decrease of about 1,500 individuals.

An Unorthodox Friday Night

For most students, Friday symbolizes a day off from classes to relax from the stresses of collegiate life. For others, like Narjis Zaidi, it is a day to volunteer with Project Downtown and distribute food to the homeless of Tampa.

Beginning at 5 p.m., this biomedical sciences major and treasurer of Project Downtown heads over to the Muslim Youth Association building where she meets fellow volunteers.

“You would think [funding] would be very volatile but it's strictly donation based. As of now, all of the money that we've gotten is from organizations that are out of USF,” Zaidi said.

Selsabeel Elyaman, food coordinator, breaks down the most basic meal that Project Downtown offers.

“We get 75 burritos and 10 loaves of bread to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So a person either gets a burrito with 2 cookies or a sandwich with 2 cookies,” Elyaman said.

“People have volunteered to cook meals and in that case, especially during the holidays whether they are Muslim or Christian holidays, we've noticed that there has been an increase naturally in people volunteering to cook the food,” said Zaidi.

Sunset Feedings

The skyscrapers of downtown Tampa surround Project Downtown (PD) volunteers as they step out of their cars and shield the blinding sun out of their eyes. Volunteers unpack the crates of food and water and begin to distribute the sandwiches to the dozens of homeless men and women who await the PD team every Friday night.

The Salvation Army parking lot is one of the few areas PD is allowed to set up due to recent laws requiring a permit for the distribution of food to the homeless.

The lot is peppered with stubborn grass that uplifts the concrete, breaking it into many fragmented pieces. The sound of gulls echoes as Gale Smith plays with her kitten and chuckles.

A petite woman in her twenties, Smith became homeless in January when she left her abusive boyfriend.

Smith says she is often the victim of stereotyping which makes it difficult for her to find a job.

“Some people don’t want us to work for them because we are homeless, because they believe that the money is going to go on drugs or alcohol. And a lot of us are out here because we’re having a hard time, we’re struggling getting a job,” Smith said.

Mary Ellen Farmer echoes Smith’s thoughts but says she finds more help for the homeless in Florida than her native North.

“I’ve been in the streets of Philadelphia; you don’t get [help]. I’m from Jersey, there’s no homeless shelters. It’s amazing how the help is here, people are very nice and are very, you know, respectful and they’re doing all that they can to help us,” Farmer said.

A Pillar of Strength

Twenty-year-old Ahmed Mohamed finds Project Downtown to be an inspiration to those who see Muslims in a negative light.

“This shows that we are not violent, we are very kind and generous and it’s a start to push the American image of Muslims to a more truthful direction. This is a way of *jihad*, a struggle to improve the community, to improve ourselves and to improve others. One of the pillars of Islam is *zakaat*, charity, helping out. This is a weekly *zakaat*, it’s a good deed every Friday. The idea of Project Downtown, it’s a small thing but it’s rewarding to a lot of people,” Mohamed said.

‘Waiting on the World to Change’

Narjis Zaidi continues to believe in helping the homeless, no matter the obstacles imposed by the City of Tampa.

“I am a single person on a planet of 6 billion people and I am able to make a difference in even one person’s life,” Zaidi said.

As Zaidi turns on her car to leave, a familiar song plays in the radio. Pop singer John Mayer croons: “One day our generation/ Is gonna rule the population/ So we keep on waiting/ Waiting on the world to change.”

Zaidi smiles and nods in agreement as she pulls away.