



Souper Service



Athens Soup Kitchen Opens Its Doors Every Thursday

Story and Photos By Toni Garrard Clay

Pictured (from left) are volunteers Janette Absher, Judith Stokes, Charlene Holcomb, Gail Doherty, Sharon White and Mary Boehler.

Eduardo Cardenas stood on a street corner in North Athens where he and several other men hoped to find work for the day. A woman drove up and rolled down her window. He expected her to ask for laborers. Instead, she told them where they could find a meal.

“She told us the soup kitchen would be open from 11 to 5,” said Cardenas. Later that day, he went where she had directed him, to North Prairieville Street, a couple blocks up from the courthouse. He was welcomed.

“The atmosphere is great. The food is great. They’re very nice,” said Cardenas, who shows up regularly, as do several of his friends. “It’s very, very helpful. It’s something I look forward to.”

The Athens Soup Kitchen opens its doors every Thursday, at no cost to visitors, to anyone in need of a good meal. It is nothing like the glum, dingy

soup kitchens that populate gritty police dramas on TV. The atmosphere is pleasant and inviting. Every table is covered with a centerpiece of silk flowers. Most importantly, it smells great. Visitors typically can choose between two types of soup, along with a sandwich, cornbread, dessert and tea or coffee. Milk is available for children.

“We keep the food simple, but it’s good,” said volunteer Janette Absher. “We want people here to feel special.”

The Athens Soup Kitchen has been years in the making. Though the kitchen isn’t church-affiliated, its origins can be traced to the Meals of Kindness program run out of Eastern Hills Church of Christ. After reading the book “Same Kind of Different As Me,” local businessman James Passmore was inspired along with his wife, Linda, to start an independent soup kitchen staffed by community volunteers of all types.





Through the efforts of many people, a location on N. Prairieville was secured, and the very hard work of restoring the site took place.

"It was in such bad shape," said Gail Doherty, who along with Absher volunteers and serves on the soup kitchen board. "We talked about going to another location, but we felt like this is where we needed to be. Basically, we built a building inside the building. A lot of volunteers worked on the place."

The soup kitchen opened in March, and word is still spreading among those most in need of what it offers. There is plenty of food and plenty of seating, and volunteers would like to see the place busy from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. every Thursday. They'd also like to be open more than one day a week, but the resources in both funding and volunteers are not yet sufficient to do so.

"This is a starting place," said Absher. "We hope to get all the community involved and supporting it."

The kitchen relies on volunteer help and donated funds to keep the food stocked and see that meals are prepared and served. The efforts of many civic, church and student groups are needed. "If the Kiwanis Club or Young Life or any group were to say,

'We'll supply the ingredients and fix the meal for a week or a month,' that's what we need," said Absher. "We want our calendar full with groups helping out."

Doherty noted that if a group can't supply the ingredients but is willing to provide manpower, they would be warmly welcomed. And one need not be a member of a group to assist. Individual volunteers and families are being sought to help serve and clean up.

"We have destitute and homeless people here," said Absher, "and we want to reach them." The important work of doing that is under way and can be seen in action every Thursday.

"We have one man who's a regular," said Doherty, "and before he leaves every time, he says, 'Praise God. Thank you for helping the poor.'"

Anyone interested in providing food, funds or volunteer service to support the work of the Athens Soup Kitchen can reach Doherty at 903-681-2754 or by mailing the soup kitchen at PO Box 1436, Athens, TX 75751. The kitchen is non-profit, and all donations are tax deductible.

