

# A Taste of Home



*"We feel we are a family – we think of it as a community supper not a soup kitchen."*

— Jane Lifton, volunteer



Joannie Hilton

pantry serve fresh, healthy food in a supportive environment every Thursday at the First Parish Church in Concord.



Peter Hilton, the president of Open Table, says "the basic underlying philosophy of our program is that anyone can attend the dinner. It started that way and we've kept it that way. We want to give our guests a taste of home."

During a recent visit, the dinner menu included green pepper crudités with olive cream cheese; spinach and orange salad with celery seed dressing; pork loin or chicken with rice and green beans, and baked apples with vanilla ice cream.

"The food here is really high quality — and they treat you with dignity, as a real guest; there is always an appetizer, a salad, an entrée, and even dessert," says Amanda. She works full-time at a coffee shop while her husband, who is a diabetic with high medical bills, stays home to care for their two children. "There is a lot of need here," continued Amanda. "This program is very helpful to our family, and the food pantry is very, very, very helpful."



The success of Open Table is due to support from over 250 volunteers and many community organizations. Crosby's Marketplace has been giving the pantry day-old bread and other items for over 20 years. The Fenn School and the Willard School host food drives and students from area schools set up, clean up, and help guests bring grocery bags to their cars. Drumlin Farm, Gaining Ground, Inc., and other local farms donate produce so that guests can eat and take home fresh food. And Project Bread provides a grant from The Walk for Hunger.

The delicious food and their "no-questions-asked" policy has drawn people from as far away as Salem and Cambridge, says Susan Evans, who runs the Open Table's sister organization in Maynard on Monday evenings. "The word has gotten out that we've got good things; other pantries just have canned food. People need our help more than ever," she says. Both dinner programs are running at capacity.



Susan Evans



Guests pack grocery bags of needed food for the week ahead.



*Open Table, which began in 1989, provides more than food to its 150 guests in Concord and 100 guests in Maynard — they give high-quality backpacks and school supplies to children before they start school, hand out plants in the spring, provide wrapped Christmas gifts for kids, and host festive holiday meals.*



*"We try to create a place where our guests are treated like whole people."*

— Peter Hilton, president of Open Table in Concord and Maynard

**Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline 1-800-645-8333**

*For Salma, who moved here from Uganda last summer, the community supper has also been a place to meet people. "We didn't have friends," she says, "so coming here meant a lot to us." The groceries given out at the pantry help her feed her four sons.*



Harriet Kaufman, in purple, helps guests with fuel and housing.



Even with all the support, the economic downturn has had a huge impact on Open Table and its guests. "People have lost their jobs," said Peter Hilton, who volunteers with his wife, Joannie Hilton, each Thursday evening, "unemployment has run out, families have gotten in trouble. We have a couple people who were hurt on the job. This year, for the first time, we've had four situations where guests of ours became homeless."

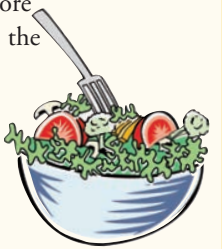
All four of those guests have been placed in homes, thanks in part to Harriet Kaufman, who volunteers as a guest support person. She listens and makes referrals on behalf of guests. They can also get social service assistance directly. At a recent dinner, representatives from Metrowest Human Services, the Council on Aging, and the Concord-Carlisle Community Services answered one-on-one questions about housing, legal services, fuel support, and flu shots.

Lisa Richards, who began eating and volunteering at the dinner 20 years ago, is the guest liaison at Open Table. She says she has noticed an increase in multi-generational families who come to the dinner. "A lot more adults have lost their jobs and are moving in with their parents. They have never gotten help before and it's hard for them."

Susan Evans, who also volunteers at Concord on Thursdays, says that there used to be leftovers from the suppers for guests to take home with them, but extra food is rare now. "Every week we've been seeing a big increase. This week we saw five new families."

Three of those new faces are young Sophie, her brother, and her mom Michelle, who just became a single mother with very limited support. Her refrigerator stopped working weeks ago and the oven just broke. "We lived with a cooler and ice for two weeks," says Michelle about how she coped before a friend brought her to Open Table. "I am determined to get the oven working by Thanksgiving."

Peter is hopeful that Michelle and her children will be able to enjoy a turkey at home but, if not, there will be a full Thanksgiving dinner ready for them at the Open Table.



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