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At Chef Hollywood's table, down-and-out Detroiters find meals to be thankful for

Neal Rubin – Detroit Free Press

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The menu for the day is chicken-fried steak, scalloped potatoes and mixed vegetables — home cooking for people who don't have homes.

It's 8:50 a.m. at the Pope Francis Center, and Chef Hollywood is behind the counter as the lunch line starts to move. He's called Chef Hollywood for a reason you wouldn't guess, and the meal is called lunch because it's the only hot meal most of the 200-plus people are going to eat all day, and you could call it high tea for all it matters.

Volunteers are on hand to dole out the food, but Willie "Chef Hollywood" Eskridge always fills the first sturdy paper plate himself to show them how he wants it to look. Steak here, potatoes there, brightly colored vegetables just-so, and when there's a garnish, he demonstrates precisely where it goes and what flourish it deserves.

Yes, a garnish. Lemon slices, maybe, or parsley, or whatever suits the menu, because there's something else on every plate:

Pride. Compassion, too. When you're one of 22 children, you know what it's like to scramble. But pride, absolutely.

"They get the best I can give 'em," says Eskridge, 57. He figures homeless people deserve the same effort as the household names he dealt with before, and if the Pope Francis Center had a Yelp account, he'd be up to his toque in stars.

Hearty food in a heartless world

Thanksgiving is the one day we all think about places like the center, a one-stop oasis of grace in a former chapel alongside Ss. Peter & Paul Jesuit Church at the eastern fringe of downtown.

The altar is now Chef Hollywood's kitchen, the pews have made way for lightweight tables and chairs, and on this day a health clinic occupies the choir loft. It's a place where people who once lived easier lives can shower, get their clothes washed, find socks, underwear and toiletries, or simply use a clean bathroom without being treated like trespassers.

The celebratory entree Thursday will be spiral-sliced ham, possibly with yams and absolutely with a vegetable. With the possible exception of Mondays, when he makes soup to accompany hundreds of donated sandwiches, Chef Hollywood's weekday menus have three parts: "Protein, starch, veg."

He pronounces that last word "vedge," the way chefs always do, and he looks like what he is. Solid build, tall white hat, black pants, black chef's jacket with "Executive Chef Hollywood" in purple on the front.

"I'm doing comfort food," he says, in circumstances where comfort can be hard to come by.

On the job only since March, he has created a following beyond the patrons known respectfully at the Pope Francis Center as guests.

Program director Tenia Denard says she's seen people drive up on the days he makes Mexican food: "Is this the place that's handing out tacos?" The regulars say his chicken, be it baked, barbecue or smothered, prompts word on the street: Hurry down!

"The guests tell us, 'This is better,' " she says from behind the steam tables as the line moves past. "He's a blessing."

In the middle of the dining area, Lance Lucas, 56, has finished his chicken-fried steak and is relaxing with a copy of Prepper Survival Guide before heading back into the cold.

Once, he was a furniture mover. Then he broke his neck and his parents died. He'd spent the previous night at a regular stop, the Detroit Rescue Mission, and knew to walk from there to the corner of Larned and St. Antoine.

"Good-ass food," he says.

17th of 22

Clinton Eskridge had 15 children with his first wife and seven more with his second. Chef Hollywood was the second kid in the second group.

Clinton made his living at a bump shop in Detroit, but he liked to cook. Young Willie was often his assistant, especially at holidays, which meant getting up at 2 or 3 in the morning — good training for now, when he starts laying the groundwork for the day's meal at 3:30 a.m.

"You get me up that early," Eskridge says, "there's going to be some ribs missing." Along with grease and sauce, he absorbed some lessons, and by his early 20s, he was in the renowned culinary arts program at Schoolcraft College.

He acquired his nickname, and tuition for culinary school, in another art form: he was a stripper. Starting in high school, the women howled for Hollywood.

"Fun days," he says, but with a limited future. Instead, he has been a hardworking, frequently moonlighting chef, mostly at the convention center that's now Huntington Place and also at hotels like the St. Regis and Omni in Detroit and the Marriott in Chicago, where he was part of a nation-trotting special event SWAT team.

Toss in catering jobs, and he has fed Patti LaBelle, James Brown, Billy Crystal, five presidents, one Prince and Arnold Schwarzenegger ("He's not that tall"), just as a sampler platter.

If Prince adored his sauteed mushrooms, toast and tea, he never said. The feedback at the Pope Francis Center is more direct.

Born in a blizzard

The center began in 1990 with a snowstorm and a pot of coffee. The pastor of Ss. Peter & Paul opened his doors, set up some folding chairs, and welcomed the first of thousands of people searching for things we're supposed to be able to take for granted.

As the need has grown, so has Pope Francis Center's reach. Not far from Chef Hollywood's home, in the Core City neighborhood, work has begun on the Bridge Housing Campus, 40 studio apartments designed to be a transition out of homelessness and a model for other cities.

He stops by sometimes to watch the building rise. The construction workers recognize him, he says, and they wave.

It's a large project from an organization with a knack for focusing on small details. Understanding that many guests have only one or two sets of clothes, for instance, the volunteers doing laundry at the center can provide loaners. And there are no apples at breakfast, in consideration of guests with more gaps in their mouths than teeth.

The center is open every day but Sunday from 7 to 11 a.m. The hot meal is preceded by coffee and a continental spread — oatmeal, bagels, oranges or bananas, applesauce, soft Quaker granola bars.

There's a brief beef in line on chicken-fried steak day, with a woman in polka-dotted pink pajama pants shouting at a woman in an oversize gray hoodie.

Peace is quickly restored. Some patrons talk to friends, some talk to themselves. A man with his elbow on a table is asleep with his head in his hand. Light streams through the arched windows of what was St. Catherine Chapel.

Derrick Thornton, 41, says he lost his home, job and girl in May, "the trifecta all at one time." He found himself on the street, learning where to be and when: Fort Street Presbyterian Church for clothing and for a hot meal on Thursdays, the corner of Michigan and Trumbull for the Salvation Army food truck most other days starting at 4 p.m.

He recently found a job, cleaning an upscale downtown restaurant in the morning for cash, and he has moved into a hotel. He still comes to the Pope Francis Center because "Hollywood is the best chef downtown."

There's a reflective pause, and he amends the assessment. "One of the best," he says. "I don't want to upset my chef at work."

A convention center (and career) repurposed

For Chef Hollywood, the pathway to the Pope Francis Center was the pandemic.

With an increased call for its services and not enough space for social distancing, the center spent the last two winters operating out of Huntington Place, which was understandably under-booked with standard conventions.

Shuddering at what they saw from the center's cook, Eskridge says, he and the other chefs at the former Cobo Center more or less stepped in. He served some knee-buckling chicken and dumplings about the time the cook quit, and negotiations proceeded quickly.

He presides now over a smallish kitchen with pitted tile floors but gleaming counters. The room is alive with the smell of sausage gravy and the sound of jazz, courtesy of his Pandora playlist.

Leslie Lynch, the organization's development director, has stopped in to watch the ingredients blend — notes, spices, voices, guests, volunteers. Ford Motor CEO Jim Farley sometimes pulls a quiet shift, but the centerpiece is the chef.

"It's really so much more than a meal," she says. There's a connection to better days, and if it's a stretch to say he's serving hope, "you can really feel and see the love he provides."

Chef Hollywood says he doesn't know about that, but sure, he's taken some punches that make you reconsider your life. A daughter, one of his seven children, died in a car wreck last year. His first wife died before that.

He remarried three years ago, and Tina blames him for what she doesn't like when she steps on the scale. He tells her he's just doing what he's meant to.

At home this week, he had six deep fryers churning, filling orders for 30 turkeys. Friends and relatives ask him what they can bring to Thanksgiving dinner at his house, and he tells them, "a plate and a fork."

"They eat my cooking," he says, "I'm touching their heart."

Then they smile and say thank you, and they're touching his.

Neal Rubin is the one person at his Thanksgiving table who looks forward to cranberry sauce. Reach him at NRubin@freepress.com, or via Twitter at [@nealrubin_fp](https://twitter.com/nealrubin_fp).