

The Gazette

A tasty boost for Share the Warmth

And theatre puts focus on the community, on stage and off

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Laurie Normand-Starr's name has been synonymous for 14 years with Montreal's popular Taste of the Nation fundraiser, an event that has raised close to \$2 million to feed the hungry.

When Normand-Starr became ill and was unable to carry on organizing the event she had founded, Herman Alves, a longtime community volunteer, stepped in to help with another.

Alves, who has been involved for years with the Share the Warmth community organization, helped to organize the Table of Hope, held Oct. 27 at Le Bitoque restaurant and art gallery in St. Henri. More than 200 people attended.

Alves and his sons, Rodney, Jeremy and Jacob, own Le Bitoque and they provided the cocktail dinatoire. There was also music by Brazilian artist Athésia and an auction of artwork and sports memorabilia.

Normand-Starr was the guest of honour. "It is so gratifying to me that the dream is kept alive, that Herman has stepped up to the plate," she said.

During its 14-year run, the money raised by Taste of the Nation was divided among three organizations: Share the Warmth, Dans la Rue and Oxfam-Québec. But Share the Warmth held a special place in Normand-Starr's heart: the Point St. Charles-based community organization, which started in 1989, today provides food and educational materials to children from 25 Montreal-area schools, organizes a range of cultural, artistic and sporting activities and offers a scholarship program. The Taste of the Nation board decided that the money remaining in the organization's corporate account would go to Share the Warmth.

The inaugural Table of Hope event raised \$50,000 for Share the Warmth, including \$22,600 from Taste of the Nation, which was presented by Normand-Starr.

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A new Montreal theatre company, Altera Vitae Productions, produces works of theatre intended to engage the community - and also to serve it.

With each production, the company partners with a community organization doing work relevant to the subject matter treated in the play. It's about paying it forward, artistic director Carolyn Fe said.

In its debut production this year, for instance, Altera Vitae produced the play 'night, Mother, a powerful work about suicide. The company donated a night of revenue to a Montreal-based organization called Family Survivors of Suicide, which offers support to people who have lost loved ones to suicide

Almost Blue, the current production, features among its characters two men who met while in prison - and one who is just out and trying to stay straight. Altera Vitae is lending support to a new community organization called Neo-Dep, which is intended to help former inmates re-integrate into society after having served their prison terms.

"Once they have done their time, they are supposed to be integrated into society - but the success rate is low," said Fe, who is making her directorial debut with this work by playwright Keith Reddin.

To Rev. René Gagnon, a Catholic priest who helped to start Neo-Dep, these former inmates are "regular people with a special problem."

After serving as a priest in several Montreal-area parishes and at the diocese in St. Jérôme, Gagnon worked in prison chaplaincy. He spent 11 years with the mental health unit at Archambault, a federal medium-security penitentiary in Ste. Anne des Plaines. Recidivism was a continuing problem, he said. "The inmates had no recourse if ever they began experiencing mental health problems - and this led to their ultimate return to prison," he said.

Often people don't know where to turn when they come out of prison, Fe said. "We hope to spread the word about this pilot group, which is helping former inmates re-integrate into society with the help of trained volunteers."

Neo-Dep, for New Departures, is financed by the Correctional Service of Canada through Montreal's community chaplains. Trained volunteers will work in pairs; their role will include such activities as accompanying these people to medical appointments.

Altera Vitae has donated office furniture, computers and the services of a computer technician to Neo-Dep, and other materials needed to run the office.

At the conclusion of the play, one of the actors addresses the audience and gives a brief talk about Neo-Dep; Fe said she hopes the production will help recruit volunteers.

Almost Blue runs until Sunday at the MainLine Theatre, 3997 St. Laurent Blvd. Call 514-849-3378 or visit www.alteravitae.com. To learn more about Neo-Dep or volunteering with the organization, call 514-759-9599.

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For John Abbott College students in a course called Community and Communication, volunteer work is the fieldwork. The course, taught by Barry Reynolds, focuses on volunteerism in a community setting.

One group of students organizes a weekly brunch and bingo for West Island seniors, in collaboration with the Volunteer West Island organization.

A costume contest, held during the Halloween brunch and bingo session on Oct. 31, added a festive note to the proceedings.

The brunch and bingo program is open to all West Island seniors. For information on joining, call 514-457-5445, Local 230.