

## Facilitator — February/March 2014



Change Language: Choose

**A New Lease on LIFE**

Meg Weadock

Sometimes, a lot of help goes a long way.

That's true of Dallas LIFE Ministries, a faith-based homeless shelter and assistance program that serves all of north Texas and has changed countless lives. And, it's true of this year's RFMA Gives charitable project, which involved a massive renovation project of the dining room and kitchen at Dallas LIFE.

With the help of hundreds of volunteers and unprecedented financial, equipment, labor and materials donations, the RFMA community is enabling Dallas LIFE to better serve the homeless and, in the process, transform even more lives.

**RFMA Pitches In**

As in years past, this year's RFMA Gives remodel recipient was selected from a group of worthy candidates in the city of the RFMA Annual Conference. Dallas LIFE was identified as an organization that impacts a great number of people but could use help to really maximize their efforts. The planning phase began back in May 2013, when RFMA Gives project leaders met to re-envision the dining area and kitchen at Dallas LIFE—in a way that only restaurant professionals could.

"RFMA Gives provides an opportunity for our members to work together, whether it's a small project or a big project, and really that's what it was created for," said Patrick Hentzen, Senior Facility Manager for KFC and project manager for the Dallas LIFE remodel. He's been involved with RFMA Gives from the start, having served on the RFMA Board of Directors when the charity arm was founded in 2010. Today, he still serves on the RFMA Gives Steering Committee.

Over the years, interest in the RFMA Gives projects has grown. And this year, everyone agreed: Dallas Life is the biggest RFMA Gives project to date—in multiple ways.

"During this year's project, the restaurant companies made a much larger commitment than what we've had in the past," Hentzen said. "When you see this project, you walk away and say, 'Oh my goodness; this is extremely complicated.' You would truly be surprised by the scope of what we accomplished. And none of it would have happened without the overwhelming support of all the RFMA members. And that isn't easy."

Hentzen estimated that more than 100 volunteers showed up to help in one weekend alone. And the commitment and enthusiasm of everyone involved was unprecedented, he said.

"So many of them, they just stepped right up. They saw right away what we needed and said, 'Yeah, sign me up for all of this,'" he said.

**A Higher Calling**

Dallas Life Ministries was founded in 1954 with a mission to minister to and help the area's homeless. It would soon grow to become the largest homeless shelter in north Texas.

The organization moved into its current building, a former department store warehouse, in 1983 after outgrowing its original facility. The current Dallas LIFE building is three stories tall, with a 3,000-square-foot kitchen and a 5,000-square-foot dining area. The sprawling facility also includes rooms and sleeping areas for up to 350 people; a dental and medical clinic; reading, writing and computer rooms; children's activity areas; a daycare facility; and a large chapel that is used for religious services and classes.

Dallas LIFE doesn't simply provide food and shelter for the homeless community; it offers a full-fledged program designed to help people get back on their feet, find work and housing, beat addiction and take hold of their lives. Many residents are involved in a 10-month program, which Rev. Bob Sweeney, the Executive Director at Dallas LIFE, said is very successful at reintegrating the homeless into society.

"At Dallas LIFE, we find accountability-based programs give our guests something to shoot for; a purpose with which to face the day," Sweeney said. "It is with these programs that we are seeing tremendous results and graduates returning to the workforce and life in general with a fresh new zest for great things."

It's a recipe that's working: Nationwide, the average success rate for similar homeless programs over six months is between 2 and 3 percent. At Dallas LIFE, they achieve an incredible success rate of 30 percent.

**A Community in Need**

Dallas LIFE serves nearly 1,000 meals a day, and their dining area and kitchen had become well-worn over the years. The dining room was especially in need of some TLC. Jay Alexander, Facility Leader at Pizza Hut and a RFMA Gives volunteer, said the room felt dark and a bit gloomy, and was furnished with simple folding tables and chairs. The kitchen was inefficient and often became overly warm in the summer.

"Initially, it was not a great environment for people who are down on their luck," Alexander said. "We wanted to try and create an environment that would make these people happy. We wanted them to be able to come in, sit down and have a meal with their families or by themselves, just to feel good. We wanted to brighten it up and make it more of a feel-good place."

In addition, the dining room only had about 160 usable seats, which forced Dallas LIFE to serve meals in shifts.

"When you know you're going to serve 300 people at one meal, you have to rotate that dining room constantly," Hentzen said. "They had to stagger their meals, so that it might be a three-hour window for any one meal. It was very hard for them to have a meal and then recover and prep and cook the next one."

The RFMA Gives team immediately saw an opportunity to completely transform the dining room into a positive, inspiring place. Simultaneously, they would improve the flow of the kitchen and serving stations to enable the shelter to serve more people, more easily, every day.

**Pitching In**

Because of the sheer size of the project, the work was divided into five main categories, each of which fulfilled a different need at Dallas LIFE: the dining room remodel, upgrading the walk-in cooler, replacing the air conditioning system in the kitchen, upgrading the dishwashing station and revamping the kitchen.

The construction got underway in November 2013. Since Dallas LIFE was still operating throughout the remodel, the RFMA Gives team had to be very careful to not disturb the residents. Work was limited to certain hours, when residents weren't sleeping. In addition, Hentzen and his team had to be very careful when choosing paint and other materials, since many residents are fighting addiction and can't be exposed to certain chemicals.

Alexander helped lead the dining room remodel, which was a massive undertaking on its own. The new "cafeteria," as Hentzen calls it, features paint in a soothing color palette and a new wainscoting, modern restaurant-style seating, enhanced LED lighting and beautiful, custom-made artwork. Rather than long tables that often forced strangers to sit together, the new layout features various table sizes, including two-tops and four-tops, which lets residents choose who they want to dine with and enables families to sit together. And now, the cafeteria can accommodate about 250 people at one time.

"We spent a lot of time watching how people initially used the dining room," Alexander said. "Dallas LIFE has a certain way of seating people, with men and women and families in their own areas. I wanted to make sure we picked the right seating to accommodate all those different groups of people. Now they can feel like they have their own space."

In addition to all the visual upgrades, the new cafeteria also features an element that is difficult to find in typical homeless shelters: music. Residents now get to enjoy music with their meals, which adds to the calm, pleasing environment. During the holidays, residents listened to Christmas music, just like they would at any restaurant.

#### Volunteers and Vendors

From RFMA members and their family and friends to restaurant companies and outside volunteers, hundreds of people pitched in to make the Dallas LIFE remodel a reality.

Richard Nelson, Vice President of Blair Maintenance & Construction and the project's volunteer general contractor, said his company signed up as soon as Hentzen asked.

"We had several of the men in our company donate their time," he said. "This was especially beneficial to the project since not all of the work could be done by general volunteers."

Two Blair supervisors worked with Hentzen to supervise the more demanding parts of the project, and a subcontractor performed the work that wasn't donated or couldn't be done by volunteers. Nelson was impressed by the level of involvement from everyone at the site.

"This project has been rewarding to all who have participated in it," he said. "It's true that it is better to give than to receive. I think everyone who participated felt they had truly done something worthwhile."

That is certainly the case for Craig Buck, Regional Facilities Manager for Chipotle Mexican Grill. He said he looks forward to volunteering for the RFMA Gives project every year.

"I feel very blessed to have my family, a home, my health and my job at an amazing company like Chipotle," he said. "I can't imagine what it's like for those who don't even have basic essentials to make it through the day. If ever I was in that position, I could only hope that there would be places like these to help."

Buck remembers the first RFMA Gives project, in Costa Mesa, Calif., and is impressed by how much volunteer support has increased over the years.

"It is so much fun working with all the great people that belong to these organizations and our RFMA members," he said. "You can tell everyone feels good about what we're doing. It's truly an overwhelming feeling to see how many generous people we have out there. My part is to do whatever I can with the time I have."

This year's project has even encouraged one retired RFMA member to get involved. Gary Richert, a facility leader who retired from Long John Silver several years ago, was one of the first RFMA Committee Co-Chairs. He has been working alongside Hentzen every step of the way, doing whatever was needed to help complete the project.

"There was no reason for him to be there, other than the fact that he cares," Hentzen said. "[Gary and I] put in some personal time, trying to make sure it came together in the most professional way possible."

#### Inspirational Touches

The new artwork gracing the walls of the new cafeteria tells the story of Dallas LIFE—its major milestones, former success stories and inspirational quotes. Past residents who completed the full 10-month program had their photos taken and provided a quote that summarizes their experience. Many of these photos and quotes have been incorporated into the custom artwork, providing everyday inspiration for residents who are currently working their way through the program.

"Part of the environment we were trying to create for the dining room is what we do at Pizza Hut with hometown décor," Alexander said. "We go into that town and find landmarks, famous people or local heroes. So when people come sit down, they identify with it. It gives something for people to talk about."

In addition, the cafeteria also looks into several glass-walled offices and the kitchen area. The idea behind the open design is to give new or struggling residents a glimpse at what others in their position have achieved—and what they could, too.

"We wanted to build community between the homeless guests that are dining and the kitchen staff, the manager and all the assistant managers," Hentzen explained. "Now, it's like in a restaurant where a manager actually spends time with his guests, shaking hands and making sure everything is good. So we intentionally moved those offices out there in the dining area. It helped as an inspiration for any of the homeless community that might be working in that kitchen to see those managers and all that they do."

Now, the renovated cafeteria feels modern, cheerful and comfortable. For Dallas LIFE residents, dining there is now a positive experience.

"We wanted people to be able to come in and sit down and just feel good," Alexander said. "If you saw this dining room before, you knew that people dreaded coming in there to get a meal. It would be hard to feel good about yourself. It wasn't anybody's fault; it was just old, and they were working with what they had. So it was really a big deal for RFMA to come in and bring all these people together to change this thing up."

#### Increased Efficiency

In addition to the new cafeteria, the RFMA Gives volunteers also increased the efficiency of food service at Dallas LIFE in several ways. First, they did away with the facility's old walk-in cooler, which was located in the dining area—completely separate from the kitchen. This not only took up precious seating space in the dining area; it caused food-handling issues. With cold storage located away from the kitchen, a lot of prep work was being done in the dining area.

"From a food-safety standpoint—that area was something restaurants would not have," Hentzen said. "We knew that the walk-in coolers needed to go into the kitchen area, but they also needed a new piece of modern equipment and they needed to update their food-handling standards."

Now, Dallas LIFE has a large, state-of-the-art walk-in cooler, which was donated by a vendor, that is directly connected to the kitchen. Food prep is simplified and more efficient now, and food safety is a priority.

In addition, the kitchen's dishwashing station was revamped to further increase efficiency. This helps to recover from meals faster than ever before.

The kitchen itself is still undergoing its transformation. Already, all of the kitchen equipment has been reorganized to maximize efficiency and give every step a logical flow. This also helped to get rid of any of the safety and food-handling concerns that were present, making it a true restaurant-grade kitchen. The kitchen's air conditioning system was also replaced to help better circulate air and keep residents comfortable while they worked.

"We recognized right away that the RFMA professionals could come in there and improve how it's laid out, the heat load and some of the challenges they had," Hentzen said. "We design restaurants all the time; we design around safety, efficiency and technology every day. When we looked at this kitchen, we could tell that no one had done that for them."

The final step of the extensive project is to install exhaust hoods over much of the cooking equipment in order to further reduce the heat load in the kitchen. This step was still in the planning and permitting phase at this issue's print deadline, and Hentzen said he expected the work to be done in February.

#### Unprecedented Support

A running theme has emerged in conversations with many of this year's RFMA Gives volunteers: absolute awe at the unbelievable level of support and commitment demonstrated by their fellow volunteers, by Hentzen, and by all the vendor and restaurant companies that donated their time, resources and money. Sweeney noticed the incredible enthusiasm right away.

"From our first day of partnering with RFMA, we saw that same excellence and drive toward greatness," he said. "They have been encouraging, helpful and amazing cheerleaders for our folks here."

Hentzen credited the countless volunteers and incredible donations from various companies for helping to make the project possible.

"I think it's a function of the organization we chose," he said. "We hope to leave them with a world-class food-service organization, so they should have a world-class dining room and a world-class kitchen. All of that is inspiring to anybody, whether you're part of that community or if you're someone helping do work there—it affects you."

#### A Measurable Difference

Now that the RFMA Gives project is coming to a close, its full impact is becoming clear. According to Sweeney, the cafeteria feels like a completely different place.

"Serving 1,000 meals a day is daunting for any organization, yet with our fresh new look our dining room has taken on a completely new personality," he said. "It's so bright and welcoming. We see our residents calmed as they walk in, and this will give them a chance to unwind during meals and have those few moments to themselves. That's what RFMA has provided."

In addition to changing the ambiance of the cafeteria and kitchen and increasing serving capacity, Hentzen hopes to also impact some lives.

"As we complete this, it isn't about just painting and putting in new lights," he said. "While that gets us to our end result, the intention is building community and trying to inspire people. A lot of the people that eat there go right back out and live on the street. You try to connect with them and inspire them to say, 'Yeah, this is a great place, and I need to get in on a program here and get off the street.'"

And thanks to the kitchen remodel, food safety standards at Dallas LIFE are higher than ever before. Now, every resident who works in the kitchen will also go through a Serve Safe program and leave Dallas LIFE with a food-handling certificate. This is a skill that residents can take with them to future jobs to prove that they have restaurant-level food-prep experience.

In the years to come, Hentzen hopes the remodel will help Dallas LIFE to become a success model for the city of Dallas—a standard that other shelters and cities could aspire to in their homeless initiatives.

"The members of RFMA should be proud of what they've done," he said. "Building a success model is larger than the people that you serve in your community; it actually goes toward the city of Dallas. With that model, they can go to other cities and show an improved success rate."

The possibilities are indeed inspiring. For everyone involved in the project, this was a chance to put their knowledge and expertise toward a worthy cause. And at Dallas LIFE, the impact will be felt for generations to come.

"RFMA is the real thing," Sweeney said. "They step in, envision the finished project and make it happen. They make you want to be better, and isn't that what we all want? We have become a better place having walked this journey with them."