

# Oral History Transcript: Interview with St. Thomas Soup Kitchen Volunteer Dennis Donelon

## Audio file

[Interview\(1\).m4a](#)

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\*Some of the interview was not picked up by the microphone, some has been summarized below...

What do you think of these three churches into one?

Dennis detailed how the Franciscans have done an incredible job and do not get enough credit for the way they merged Mary, Mother of God. He emphasized how they've done a phenomenal job in allowing all three churches to stay open as separate entities so that communities can keep going there, and he thinks people were receptive to the change because they kept it open for the congregations to kind of run it themselves and be in charge of the changes. He was very happy with it.

What was community sentiment like about this change? Or people open to the idea, or more resistant?

He said the community as a whole was open to the change because they needed resources, and the archdiocese was very lenient in giving the people autonomy to be in charge of the changes that occurred, so no one felt steamrolled

Do you have a special connection to the neighborhood and community that you'd like to share? What motivated you to volunteer in the first place, and more specifically at St. Thomas?

Dennis shared a touching story about him and his late son's story with this parish. In an act of true vulnerability and kindness, he opened up about his own son Aaron's struggles with mental health and his own connection to many of the people who live on the streets of Uptown and turn to substances or harsh lifestyles to cope with their mental disorders. Dennis said that any one of these people could be like his son, and that they were all somebody's son, daughter, mother, father, etc. and that he felt it was his calling to serve these people, because that is what being a good family and community member is all about. Dennis has a special connection to St. Thomas in particular because he and his son volunteered at the soup kitchen together, where they became friendly with regulars. Dennis is a sort of jack of all trades, washing dishes, cooking soup, setting up tables, serving guests, acting as an usher. During his time as a volunteer, his son also worked

security twice a week for the soup kitchen, where he bravely prevented two fights before they began. After the tragic loss of Aaron, his funeral was held in this very building, and many of his clothes were donated to the pantry as an homage to his memory. Dennis proudly showed us photos of regulars who knew and loved Aaron donning different articles of clothing that Dennis had donated, including hats, jackets, and scarves. Each guest had a huge smile on their face because they had received one final gift from their friend.

Dennis continued by saying that people got too comfortable with driving by and seeing their neighbors and community members sleeping at bus stops and under bridges, and that politicians never pay a price for declining to help these forgotten members of society. He emphasized how seemingly endless resources are allocated to the recent migrant communities entering the country, but that lifelong members of the country and community have been left to fend for themselves. Dennis drove the point home that there is a serious mental health epidemic in this country that is being ignored due to stigma and unpleasantness, and that he didn't know quite how pervasive this was until it affected his own son so profoundly.

I know you mentioned salad and soup earlier when we walked in, but what other kinds of food do you serve and how is it paid, transported and/or prepared?

Dennis said that they source most of their food from the Chicago Food Depository, which is currently free of charge but is not likely to stay that way. They primarily provide soup, salad, and anything else they have access to such as bread, fruit, crackers, and vegetables. After the meal is served, volunteers wait by the door with packaged leftovers in containers and bags so that guests not only get a meal for the night, but something to sustain them throughout the week as well. He also gave a shoutout to two other volunteers working in the back of the hall who are in charge of making the "famous" salads that everyone loves.

Dennis then went on to mention what he referred to as miracles that seemed to be an act of God when the soup kitchen fell into dire circumstances. He described the first miracle as Jim Eder recalled it: he was working in the soup kitchen on an average Tuesday night, when a couple of troublemakers began converging on him with the intent to beat him up. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, two large, towering black men appeared behind each of his shoulders, staring down the threatening men. They backed off wordlessly, and the two men who saved Eder disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. I expressed my awe at this, and Dennis replied, "God works in mysterious ways". The second miracle was one Dennis was present for; one evening during the early 2000's, cooks had burnt the soup on accident. Seeing as so many ingredients were wasted and burnt soup is not salvageable, Dennis had to throw it out and worried about what to feed the guests. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door, and a food truck coming back from an event offered to donate hundreds of leftover, pre-cooked and pre-packaged hot dogs to feed the hungry. Dennis remarked that this really seemed like an act of God, and I agreed.

How often does the soup kitchen operate, and how often do you volunteer?

The soup kitchen operates every Tuesday and Friday, and guests are allowed to be down here from 5:30–6:30. Dennis and the volunteers usually get there around 2:30 and stay until 7:30 to help set up, prepare food, and clean up. Depending on his golf schedule, Dennis usually tries to make it both days, but if he doesn't make it on a day he usually would, he makes sure he attends church in lieu of his volunteer service.

How many people do you usually serve each time you volunteer?

In Dennis's time, it usually varies from 140-160 people a night, but back in the 1980's when he explained that the mental institutions were shut down and many such residents were kicked out onto the streets and congregated in the neighborhood, volunteers and Jim Eder would typically serve 500-600 people with bare-bones equipment and support. He added that back then, people were a lot more volatile and openly aggressive, so fights breaking out was a regular occurrence.

Do you have any donors and supporters of the soup kitchen?

Dennis says that donors come in all forms, some people come to the church and drop off a check, saying that they want the money to go toward the soup kitchen, some people volunteer their time, some people offer to buy new kitchen equipment, and so on. He went on to say that something that could really help operations are two new stovetops and ovens, as the ones they have now are not as reliable as he'd like them to be.

Does the kitchen serve people of all faiths?

He said that the kitchen never discriminates against anyone on the basis of culture or religion; all are welcome because they are all human beings and that Jesus would never turn someone away. He knows that people of all faiths come and go, and they never ask anyone if they are Catholic or otherwise. He even said that just last week, he encountered a man from Africa who had just recently left his homeland for Chicago, which was very fascinating.

## Transcript

[KASEY OHM] So what do you think motivated you to volunteer in the 1st place and more specifically at the soup kitchen?

[DENNIS DONELON] That's a good question. So. My son. Actually passed away in. December last year, but he struggled with mental health. He lived in and out of. And. I felt like, OK, these people my son could be. One of those people in. The streets and. Chance for me to give back, be involved and contribute in a way that. Yeah, it felt effective and compelling. It also allowed me to engage my son in Heaven.

He was actually our head of security here. There's a big strapping guy, 6 foot 4 big. Yeah. *[Small laugh]* Big boy. He knew many of the guests because he saw them either in the psych wards or the nursing homes and they knew him. They all like them and he was very helpful because when some guests got a little non compliant was good, have him behind me to. Be that force. And when he spoke, they saw him. They listened and he— he wasn't. He wasn't a bully.

He, in fact, there was one guest that was threatening another guest with a hammer. And Aaron used his words to talk Them out of doing that. Totally pacified the situation. It was quite impressive. Another time the guy was threatening to punch somebody. And — and looked at the guy straight in the eyes and said, “You don't want to do that. Bad things are going to happen”. The guy just stopped. And walked away. So he — That — that was my motivation and we actually had his... Funeral here at the church. And the reception.

[K.O.] I feel like... That's really great way to honor him. *[Pause]* Yeah.

[D.D.] Thank you.

[K.O.] Thank you for sharing.

[D.D.] He was very proud of it.

[K.O.] I feel like you keep his memory alive by doing this.

[D.D.] I'll share with you a picture.

[K.O.] Oh, yeah, that'd be great. Thank you.

[D.D.] He was a giant young man. *[Both laugh.]*

[K.O.] What was his name?

[D.D.] Aaron. A-A-R-O-N. *[Brief pause, Dennis is looking on his phone for the photo.]* I might have a picture of him at the soup kitchen but...

[CHARLIE BEVENOUR] Sorry for your loss.

[D.D.] Yeah. Thank you.

*[Dennis pulls up a photo of his son on his phone: Aaron is a large man with brown hair and thick, black glasses and a full beard, smiling with his dad to the camera.]*

[K.O.] Oh my gosh, that's so sweet. You guys look so happy. *[Laugh]*. Yeah, that's awesome.

[D.D.] Yeah... He — he's my guy.

[K.O.] That's so sweet. Yeah, I'm sure he meant a lot to — other people here to see him.

He did. As a matter of fact? A guest who I hadn't seen in some months showed up here and he knew Aaron quite well. He went out of his way to... You know, express his condolences. but we donated a lot of Aaron's clothing here and a lot of the people —

[K.O.] Oh wow.

[D.D.] — got jackets or sweatshirts. So this man — *[DENNIS shows more photos: it is multiple people who come to the soup kitchen wearing the old clothes of Aaron's that were donated]* — this man still wearing his. Coat. His shirt.

*[Multiple voices expressing fondness and reacting to the photos]*

[D.D.] For sure. For sure. That's his hat.

[K.O.] I love that.

[D.D.] James got a sweatshirt. You have another hat there. But Jack. Jack knew Aaron quite well... Sean — Sean and Aaron had a bond, Sean's a big guy. In fact, Aaron nicknamed Sean “Captain Morgan”. Because when Shawn would sit there and eat a soup, he wouldn't sit and stand, but put one foot on the chair like the Captain Morgan commercial. So he and Aaron have a simple bond. But anyhow.

[ROMAN ROSARI] Thank you for sharing that.

[K.O.] Yeah. That's incredible. Yeah. Do you still see a lot of those people on a regular basis?

[D.D.] Yeah. God works in mysterious ways so.

[K.O.] Yeah, and then a bit about the soup kitchen itself. I know you guys mentioned some soup and salad. Are there any other kinds of food and then how is it like transported or prepared?

[D.D.] Yeah, so the food's primarily consumed out here we we have 250 gallon pots of soup. And the soup can vary from day to day, Tuesday to Friday, based on what protein we have to use and what vegetables that we have to go with that. We try to make it somewhat recognizable as a soup. Not so much a goulash. There are salads that Ceceila will make delivered to the table. All the guests are treated as if they're at a restaurant to come and sit down and we started with our soup at the table. We serve them their salads; we have bread tabled by coffee, milk, water, or juice to the table. Then we also have containers that will package up then people don't take the soup home and take the soup home for a week.

And then before they leave, they go to this window here. And there's bags of food that we will give them that might have a sandwich in it, we have apples and put apples and oranges and crackers, or chips or cheese or other stuff that we can get together. And they'll take that home with them. We open the doors at 5:30pm. And the guests are allowed to be down there until 6:30pm. Sometimes we'll let that linger a little bit, but we try to keep it tight because volunteers want to get home to take advantage of the volunteers. And we usually start I usually get here about 230 Joanne Celia, we'll get here a little earlier, some people who start their — their routines, and we're usually walking out the door by seven o'clock. So that's one day, every Tuesday. I jokingly tell people, I'm the chief cook and bottle washer. Because I am one of the chief cooks for making the soup head I do the dishes. And I also do security or whatever it might be needed.

[K.O.] That's great. That's great, Jack of all trades.

[R.R.] I have a question. So I know. Typical soup kitchen setup serve like buffet style, but you treat it like a restaurant. Um, rather than that. Is there a reason that you guys do that? Or is there —

[D.D.] to give these people dignity. They are human beings, there's somebody's mom, Father, uncle, brother, son, daughter, sister. It's — they're human beings. That's why I think it plays out how we also approach it. The approach that like it's like a buffet style, I think we wouldn't have that personal connection. That was the way my question. That was Jim's

[K.O.] Yeah, because it really sets it apart from other soup kitchens I've heard of.

[D.D.] Yeah, that's what we hear.

[K.O.] That's great, yeah.

[D.D.] We get a lot of comments, we serve about — the numbers been higher as of late. So the other night we got 43 people, but as I said earlier, they give you the tour. When this first opened, he was serving upwards of 500. 600 people. Like so and they had. Had some wild times back then where people were going crazy, but. Keeps going.

[K.O.] Do you happen to know? Is there like an especially that need back then for it? Was this like the only shoe kitchen around basically?

[D.D.] Back in the early 80s, late 70s, early 80s. Most of the countries shut down all state shut down their psychiatric hospitals. So for whatever reason, Uptown, became the magnet for all these beatings in Illinois price every flipside of that. So it's just overwhelmed. You know, people who will go down that trip society, and they come. And the church saw need and joke. Jim used to joke all the time that he was the temporary director was only supposed to be the director for two weeks that they find somebody. And it was a Chicago public school teacher. And he's like, Okay, I'll do it. Sure enough he's doing for you.

[C.B.] They said through my research, it talked about the institutionalized closing in the late 70s. And how it used to break out here almost every day and have said that chip, there's a point where they were deciding whether they should close the soup kitchen. And Jim decided that before he made his decision, he wanted to go and pray. And then when he came back, he had an idea of wanting to pray between all the meals. And that was what kind of called the people down at the end of they ended up not shutting it down and using that prayer, sort of making people not fight each other basically.

[D.D.] Interesting, I didn't know that. That's good history. But we do say a prayer before. Every soup and on Tuesday nights, there's Vespers upstairs, so any concert they have to work to 10 customers. If you go to church and listen to the Gospel, this is what Christ calls us. As a server, fellow human beings. If I miss church on a day, I don't feel so bad if I'm working with the soup kitchen because it's kind of like going to church. So that's

[K.O.] That's incredible. [*KYLIE MILLER comes in the room*] Yeah. So this is Kylie. She also goes to Loyola.

[D.D.] Yeah, Hi.

[K.O.] So I think you answered a lot of these. Do you guys have many donors and supporters of the soup kitchen?

We do it. It comes in all shapes and sizes. Church once or twice a month, we'll take a collection up at church and ask for additional funds. The parish does a lot of it, a lot of the food comes from the. Chicago Food Depository we're not charged. For it at the moment. That's probably going to change, but there was also private donors, funds or people we

never met. Just, you know, there's. A need and. They donate. Matter of fact there's a meeting this Friday. I can't make it, But someone's step forward, they're willing to give us the equipment to help improve the soup kitchen. My vote is for, we have an oven back there that works. Sometimes sometimes doesn't work. So my vote is let's get to regular ovens with some stovetop so we could create different types of meals out as well. And take advantage of that. We like to have people just drop checks off the church.

[K.O.] OK, that's awesome. Because I was about to ask like if there was any preferred way to donate, would it be like your time, your money, anything? Is there a preference?

[D.D.] You know. Time is always valued, appreciated money helps with a lot of things. So whatever works for the person.

[K.O.] Yeah. Thank you. It's good to know. And then this might be kind of a stupid question, but does the kitchen serve people of all faiths?

[D.D.] Yeah we don't ask if they're Catholic or Christian, we don't want to require people to show any identification. I'm sure we get people that are Jewish, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, Baptist, just met a guy the other day from Africa. Right off the boat. Don't know what faith is. Didn't ask him. There's no litmus test. Although we do — We're Catholic, so during Lent, we've don't serve meat on Fridays, the soup is a high protein soup but no meat.

[K.O.] And then, do you have I mean, you already shared a lot. But do you have anything else like interesting to share about the history of the evolution of the Church and anything to add?

[D.D.] Jim always talked about some of the different miracles. So back to the time when there was fights going on. Jim was about to get beat up. And by some of the guests, and out of nowhere, these two big black gentlemen showed up. He'd never seen him before. doesn't know who they are, didn't know who they are. But they came and stood right behind him. The people stopped, sat down, everything dissipated. And they were gone.

[K.O.] Wow.

[D.D.] I don't know if they're angels, but —

[K.O.] That's incredible. Kind of sounds like.

[D.D.] The other time, this is more of a funny side. Something happened with a soup got burned, and you can't serve that. And they used to burn the pot quite a bit — I used to clean this pot. Anyways, the soup was just not salvageable. And we didn't know what was going to happen. Next, right now there's a knock at the door. And the person has a food

truck coming from some event. And they've got hundreds of hotdogs precooked, wrapped in oil backs, and they're looking to donate, that became the dinner.

[K.O.] That's incredible. What year is that? You say?

[D.D.] That was back in the early 2000s, so Jim talked about that all the time.

[K.O.] It really does seem like an act of God.

[D.D.] Do you wonder, right? Eyes wide open, but yeah, that's the. Yeah. God touches you in different ways.

[K.O.] Definitely. And what impact do you think it would have on the community if the soup kitchen no longer operated? Like, what do you think people would do? Where would they turn?

[D.D.] They returned to the corners. They'd be. Nagging at the restaurants the street corners. Yeah. God knows what.

[K.O.] Yeah. Well, one thing that I did learn through through all of my research and like we even got to look through the rectory and some documents and it really seemed like, you know, there have been ups and downs and like means and money and, you know, resources and everything. But the church has never let that affect like the congregants. They're always there. They never let like anybody. Get down on their luck and like the church isn't there for them so.

[D.D.] This church is again the Franciscans deserve a lot of credit, and they've done a nice job keeping this going keeping this. Yeah, probably doesn't get enough credit. They don't get enough credit for. What they do, it's a beautiful thing. So.

[K.O.] Yeah, definitely.

[D.D.] We need volunteers in the summer, so if there's people want to volunteer, show up.

[K.O.] And then every Tuesday and Friday?

[D.D.] Every Tuesday and Friday, yeah. Show up around 2:30. Be ready to go home around 7:00.

[K.O.] I might actually do that this summer. Yeah, because I'll be in the suburbs, so.

[D.D.] You got my number? [KASEY nods] Awesome. Bring your friends. Your family. [Asking CHARLIE, ROMAN, and KYLIE] You guys want to too?

*[The four speak indistinctly, speaking about their experiences volunteering with various enthusiasm.]*

[D.D.] You'll see people all levels of health. Oh, I forgot there was — It was actually a Loyola student was volunteer that. This gentleman came in and had frostbite. On his fingers. Couldn't hardly could walk. But couldn't hold his pants up. Have in the bathroom with this young man *[Pause.]* Helped him. That night, by the grace of God.

[K.O.] That's beautiful. Yeah. Yeah, I saw on the food pantry website it serves or it says that you guys serve locals as well as out of area clients on an emergency basis. And have you ever experienced that emergency scenario before?

[D.D.] The soup kitchens, separate operation from the pantry, which is that it's actually a nice setup. The Knights of Malta actually helped set that up. But we again, we know we get people from out of the immediate race. I know we get people from the rough side of Chicago, Southside Chicago, as far as Evanston come down from our soup. But we don't we don't put a restriction on the soup kitchen does because they're just tactically trying to serve the earth in that they're trying not to double dip.

[K.O.] Yeah. And then does the soup kitchen over work alongside St. Gregory's or Saint Itas ever?

[D.D.] We've never, we've always done it here. That we there was talk about moving it at one point, but that just didn't make sense.

[K.O.] I know we've already kind of gone into this, but are there any other people that you've encountered while volunteering here that have really like, touched you or made an impression on you?

[D.D.] Just individuals, I've gotten to know some people have shown me pictures, who I've gotten close to. I see people on the street. I know where they live, either bus stop or under bridges

[K.O.] So and what do you feel that the best thing has been about this volunteer experience?

[D.D.] That's again, as I said earlier, it's allowed me to walk in Jesus's steps. We all go to church and kind of get into routines, I get distracted. Your phone's buzzing, because there's a text message or something right? Not really taking it under really thinking deeply about what's being said and the gospel readings. But this is living the life of Jesus as much as possible, doing what he wants. So I feel I'm closer to God.

[K.O.] And then, do you have any questions for us or anything else you'd like to add?

[D.D.] Do you guys volunteer now?

[K.O.] No, not recently.

[C.B.] I did but I stopped when I got to college.

[D.D.] So if you don't value your time, nobody else will. And if you don't schedule your time, by best you could. So find something now set of goals I'm gonna doesn't always have to be money can be timely given to the service of the church. And pick a pick something whether it's this food pantry or some other office and build into your schedule, just like it would be just going out friends for drinks or some other fun activity. You won't regret it.

[K.O.] Well, I think I graduate next week, but after that I'll be in the suburbs. But I would like to come in maybe like once. A week or something. I have the number so I get in contact with you.

[D.D.] Yeah. Thank you.

[K.O.] Do you guys have anything else? Any other questions?

[C.B.] Based on your experiences, what wisdom would you share with future generations about service community?

We're all part of the same community. But for the grace of God, any one of those convenience. People I see here most likely have some mental illness, something that didn't enable them to live out a full life. They tried to find coping skills that you know, don't work, whether it be drugs or alcohol or just you know, separating through society. So, if we don't do this, who will? If not us who? Right? So, if you want a strong community and need to focus on family families, part of the community, Mother Teresa said "if you want to change the world, go home and love your family". Love your community, love your family. Makes sense?

[C.B.] Yeah.

[D.D.] What else do you have?

[R.R.] I had something. So from this whole experience talking with us and anyone who might listen to this, what's — what is like one thing or a couple of things you're hoping that people take away from speaking to you today? What do you want people to leave with after we speak?

[D.D.] We're, we're not really sol — *[Some soup kitchen volunteers saying goodbye to DENNIS as they passed]*. Have a good night.

We're not we're not solving the underlying problem, just kind of was a band, or the line probably problems a major mental health issue in this country that's not being addressed. And people are turning to drugs, alcohol or something else to try and solve. So we really need to put more focus on it. I also would say that for years, people were okay, driving by

people living on bus stops, or tents. You know, God knows where else. Somehow we find a lot of money for all these migrants coming to the country. All right, well, got a lot of Americans here that need help, too. So how do we step back and recognize that there's people that need help put our priorities behind our family? It was politically, there was no political price to pay more than people in the shadows. So that really did shed some light on the shadows. Trying to help him just the newest newcomers to the country

[R.R.] Has it been working and volunteering at the soup kitchen that's like, changed your view on things like mental health and homelessness and on unhousedness in the country?

I think, my experience what my son what he had to deal with the challenges there. It made me much more aware that its impacts more people than we know. People don't talk about most people ignore talking about it because of stigma. That's part of the problem. There's that stigma to really get people to help they need their services out there. But you don't have somebody advocating for you very hard to get the services. That's, that's a challenge. So, for me, it's just more awareness and more freedom to talk and share with people what I do, and expose people to what the opportunity is. Because many people, they don't want, they don't want that inconvenient truth. They'd like to go about their daily activities, find some us taking care of it, and let someone else take care of it is us one way or the other. So I think more awareness, more accountability, recognition that more needs to be done and can be done

[KYLIE MILLER ]I wasn't sure what questions were asked... Did we talk about the merger?  
*[Various voices speaking to KYLIE] Talking about how effective...*

[D.D.] It didn't — didn't affect this operation at all, if anything, but I think it brought more people to help volunteer from the different churches. It wasn't just this parish. I think the way the Franciscans have handled the merger, Mary mother kind of parishes phenomenal. And I love the name. I love how they've kept all three churches viable. They're still part of the parish and the people who rent most parishes don't feel like they're left too strict or so good.

[R.R.] I think then that's it from us. Thank you so.

*[The five speak indistinctly, but you can hear the interviewers thanking DENNIS for his time, and speaking about volunteering]*