

The Arlington Connection

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Community Fills Up Empty Bowls

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ARLINGTON CONNECTION

The Arlington community has filled the parking lot and lined the streets for the AFAC Empty Bowls event, back in person after a break for Covid. Charles Meng, Arlington Food Assistance Center CEO, says, "This is truly a community event that brings together families, volunteers, supporters."

A line forms out the door at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Sunday, Feb. 12 waiting to choose a hand crafted pottery bowl donated by local potters and fill it with soup. Some choose a paper bowl and others fill their new pottery bowl with soup. The diverse spread of soups includes everything from lentil and butternut squash to potato and Brunswick stew. The popular lobster bisque has just run out and the line stops mid table until the tureen has been refilled. A new Korean tofu soup has been added to the choices this year.

One of the first in line is 101-year-old Elizabeth Ochenrider with her daughter Lisa Purrington. Ochenrider navigates her walker carefully to the table lined with pottery bowls of all description. She carefully chooses a blue bowl swirled with decorations inside. "See how artistic." After a little thought she chooses the chicken noodle soup, and her daughter picks the lentil. Ochenrider says she has been coming to the Empty Bowls events for years. "I have a lot of these bowls."

Meanwhile at a table nearby, 2-year-old Iris Staley attends her first Empty Bowls event, also choosing chicken noodle soup and a large roll that she soaks in her bowl and stuffs in her mouth.

Spheres and the Community from George Mason University plays classic music from the stage at the end of the room.

Student volunteers circle the room picking up empty paper bowls, pouring water and assisting with clean up. Anna McLaughlin and Sophia Delaney are two of the student volunteers from H-B Woodlawn and represent the National Honor Society. McLaughlin says she has worked for AFAC doing other volunteer work like packing food. "I love to use my time to make other people happy."

Delaney says she grew up volunteering with her mom and always drops off food for AFAC. "It's very important in my family to do this for other people."

Meghan French is another volunteer who is there today because



Volunteers ladle out the popular lobster bisque at Empty Bowls Sunday, February 12.



AFAC CEO Charles Meng tells the group the number of families served per week hit a new peak in late January of 2,888.



Elizabeth Ochenrider, 101 years old, is one of the first in line for the AFAC Empty Bowls event.



Two-year-old Iris Staley finds a roll soaked in chicken noodle soup to be her favorite at Empty Bowls.



Anna McLaughlin and Sophia Delaney join a group of Honor Society students from H-B Woodlawn to volunteer at Empty Bowls.

a colleague asked for help. And she says she does a lot of volunteering with her daughter who is there today as well. "I love AFAC."

Meng says this is the eleventh

year for Empty Bowls. The event has become so popular they have had to add a second seating to accommodate another 200 people. Meng tells the group AFAC had

been serving about 2,000 families weekly but during Covid the number climbed to 2,468 families a week. And then the number climbed some more. "The last

week in January we hit a new peak of 2,888 families. We go up about 150 a month." Meng explained this year AFAC will hit 1.5 million served. "We do numbers in real time so I'll know who that person is, and we'll celebrate."

Meng says AFAC has served 68,000 families in the seven months since their fiscal year began. "At this rate we may well be serving 140,000 by the end of the year." Meng says there is lots of need in surrounding areas. AFAC has expanded to a small site in Falls Church and in the next couple of weeks will add a site in Alexandria with several new sites to come in Arlington as well. "We are committed to never turn anyone away. You, the donors have made this possible."

But he adds, "Arlington will always be our focus; this is where it all began."



Soup and music enliven a rainy day at the AFAC Empty Bowls community event February 12 at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.

PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY RUHE