Faith, Food and Friends (FF&F) is a parish-funded, volunteer-run outreach program that is part of Old St. Joseph’s Church’s response to the Gospel’s call to feed the hungry and minister to the poor. FF&F volunteers plan, prepare and serve a noon meal for men in Barbelin Hall on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from late August through the following July, with short closings at Christmas and Easter. From August 2018 through July 2019, FF&F was open on 140 days, and our volunteers prepared and served 6891 meals.

FF&F’s volunteers are parishioners, neighbors and friends of the parish, with over 50 regular active volunteers. Typically committed to serve one day a week, the volunteers cook, set up the dining room and serve the meal. Sometimes, volunteers bring in delicious home-baked desserts to top off lunch in style for 65 hungry and appreciative men.

Other volunteers come to us from organizations with which FF&F has developed a special relationship. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we may be joined by WSFS Bank (formerly Beneficial Bank) employees who come in on their lunch hour, through the Bank’s community service program. For the past three years, students from St. Joseph’s University serve one morning per week for a semester as part of a service-learning class. We are pleased to be continuing this partnership with SJU in the 2019-2020 academic year.

Guest attendance is limited to 63-70 guests to foster fellowship and community. Daily attendance averages between 50-60 guests, with attendance lower earlier in the month and increasing to full capacity toward the end of the month, when guests may have exhausted their government assistance funds. Upon entering Barbelin Hall at 11:30 AM, the men help themselves to coffee or tea, choose a seat, and have some time to socialize before lunch is served. Lunch is served at noon. The meal is cooked and plated in the kitchen and is served restaurant style by the volunteers. Afterwards, the men bus their own tables and take care of the kitchen and dining hall clean up. FF&F’s typical meal includes a soup, a salad, a main course (consisting of a meat or protein, a starch and a vegetable) and a dessert. Beverages include coffee, tea, milk, chocolate milk and water.

Meals are planned in advance on a monthly basis. FF&F places an order each month with a food wholesaler for the groceries required to prepare the planned meals. The parish pays the cost of the the groceries and necessary kitchen supplies.

In addition to serving what our guests tell us are the best meals in town, FF&F provides the —continued inside
following support services for our guests:

Mail: FF&F serves as a mail drop for those guests who wish to use the Church’s address as their legal mailing address. Having a secure address to receive mail helps guests apply for and obtain housing, medical benefits and various forms of assistance.

Health Services: On Saturdays, a volunteer nurse is available to take blood pressure readings.

Assistance with Benefits and Tax Issues: An RN/case worker assists the men with benefits questions and with completing and filing tax forms, including Pennsylvania rent rebate filings.

Toiletries and Socks: Once a week, we provide basic toiletry items (soap, shampoo, razors, deodorant, etc.) and hundreds of pairs of new socks to guests in need, thanks to the generosity of OSJ parishioners and our volunteers. In addition, thanks to various one-time donations, FF&F is often able to provide occasional clothing items and shoes to guests in need.

Celebrations and Ceremonies: The bonds of community and friendship at FF&F were strengthened this year as we celebrated joyful events and remembered the lives of community members whom we lost. The WSFS Bank team, OSJ’s Spirituality Committee and other generous friends took over our kitchen and prepared and served special meals on various occasions (or no special occasion) throughout the year. We rang in the Christmas holidays at our annual Christmas party, with carols, a competitive game of trivia, a special roast beef dinner, and gifts of hand-knit scarves from OSJ’s Eldership Committee.

In December we remembered a long-time FF&F guest who passed away suddenly, with a prayer service led by OSJ’s pastor Walter Modrys SJ and attended by FF&F guests, volunteers, and caregivers and friends of the deceased. In June, Father Modrys led us again in prayer as we celebrated the life of long-time volunteer and former program coordinator, John Trumbore, at a remembrance service in Barbelin Hall attended by FF&F volunteers and guests and John’s children and grandson. John personified the spirit of FF&F. He led Saturday spirituality sessions, acted as postmaster for guests receiving their mail at OSJ, and served as the delighted architect of the annual Christmas party and its spirited trivia competition that emphasized all things Philadelphia.

Shelter and Housing: In September 2018, FF&F began a collaboration with the Bethesda Project to assist our street-homeless guests in finding emergency shelter and working towards affordable stable housing. An experienced caseworker from the Bethesda Project began visiting FF&F two or three Saturdays a month for lunch and conversation. A second experienced case worker joined this effort in July 2019 and now visits FF&F on Tuesdays. This collaboration has benefitted many of our guests. Twenty-three men were admitted to Bethesda’s Church Shelter program, coming in off the streets for a period of time during the coldest part of the past winter. Of those 23 men, six are currently in-shelter, awaiting a housing opportunity; four have moved to a safe haven for chronically homeless men; and six have signed a lease for permanent supportive housing and “have keys” to their own apartments. Of further note, for men who do not stay in city shelters, attendance records at FF&F have provided critical evidence in establishing a history of homelessness, which is necessary documentation to begin the quest for subsidized housing.

On behalf of everyone connected with FF&F, I offer heartfelt thanks to Old St. Joseph’s parish, staff and extended community for the many ways, large and small, in which you support FF&F and affirm and encourage its care for some of the least among us. None of this could happen without each and every FF&F volunteer’s generous, faithful and regular service. Our volunteers bring good cheer, camaraderie and joy in service as they work to implement our goals of providing great meals and a welcoming and safe place for guests to come and enjoy fellowship and support. I also wish to thank our guests and our hard-working guest/volunteers for sharing themselves, their perspectives, their struggles, and their hopes and aspirations with all of us.

—Deborah Hluchan
Coordinator, Faith, Food & Friends