

Marion Kane:

What are you making?

Staff Member:

This is just some leftover meatloaf and we're going to put it in the fridge because we're making chili tomorrow night and we're going to put it in the chili.

Marion Kane:

Okay. Waste not, want not.

Staff Member:

That's right. We can't waste anything around here. We can't afford to.

Theme Music

Marion Kane:

In the kitchen at Sistering, they're cooking up a storm on a tight budget. The cooks at this drop-in and shelter never know how many women they'll have to feed. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®, and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen®". Homelessness in Toronto is a real crisis and the crisis is getting worse. Sistering is doing its part to provide help and dignity to women in cruel circumstances. But as you'll hear, this frontline facility faces its own challenges.

Theme Music

Marion Kane:

What do we have here today for lunch Maureen?

Maureen Watson:

We have roasted potatoes, barbecued chicken and stuffed peppers with beans and rice and the soup today is split pea.

Marion Kane:

It all looks good. Do you think Maureen cooks good food?

Woman:

She is marvellous and they are doing very, very great merciful things to these people who are here.

Marion Kane:

I'm talking to Maureen, a long-time chef here at Sistering. I know her from 2011 when we raised \$60,000.00 for this kitchen. Will you introduce yourself Maureen?

Maureen Watson:

I'm Maureen Watson and I've been at Sistering for 11 years.

Marion Kane:

You come in from Brampton, one and a half hour's journey and you start at 7:30 am.

Maureen Watson:

Yes, I do. And the first thing that I come in, I put the mats down on the floor, those are slip mats to prevent anyone from falling. Then I start on the breakfast if it's eggs or if it's hot cereal that we're going to have for breakfast.

Marion Kane:

You house overnight people. That's a new thing.

Maureen Watson:

It is a new thing. But it's about three years now that we are doing a 24-hour drop-in.

Marion Kane:

How many people do you feed each day?

Maureen Watson:

Over 200 every day.

Marion Kane:

How do you devise the menus?

Maureen Watson:

We do a weekly menu between the three chefs that are here. We do a weekly menu. If we do get a donation that's something that has to be used then we can revise the menu as we go along.

Marion Kane:

What are your specialties at Sistering. What are the most popular things?

Maureen Watson:

Hmmm. Chicken. They love the chicken and at Sistering. Soups. They love the soup as well. Rice and peas. What else? They love the stews. They also love the seafood stew.

Marion Kane:

Oh. Seafood stew?

Maureen Watson:

Yes, because we get donated seafood from Red Lobster. We save it up and once a month we make a seafood stew out of it.

Marion Kane:

How do you make it?

Maureen Watson:

Usually we do a tomato base. So tomatoes, onions, garlic, and sauté that on the stove. Then we put the shrimps, lobster in it and then just let it simmer.

Marion Kane:

Do any women compliment you on the food? It's delectable, by the lunch I ate today.

Maureen Watson:

They do. It's well-appreciated to know that something that I have cooked.

Marion Kane:

You could work other places in a regular restaurant. Why do you work here?

Maureen Watson:

I came to be at Sistering – I was out of work and I went to the YMCA to do a food handler and a food program there and a gentleman by the name of Calvin was the supervisor there. He said, "There's a place called Sistering and they're looking for somebody to work." Our coordinator at the time was Carol Gray. He said, "Your personality and hers would click." I came and 11 years later and I'm here. It just touches my heart. It gives a different perspective in life because one tragedy in your life and you could be just like one of these women.

Marion Kane:

Homeless.

Maureen Watson:

Yes, for sure.

Marion Kane:

I'm with Wendy Bray at the office of Sistering on the second floor. Can you introduce yourself?

Wendy Bray:

Hi. I'm Wendy Bray and I'm the front development manager at Sistering and I've been here for about two years.

Marion Kane:

What did you say just now about the food that's supplied by various charities and organizations.

Wendy Bray:

Every day we are providing approximately 500 meals for women who are homeless or precariously housed or living in poverty. We're very fortunate to have partnerships with Second Harvest and Daily Bread Food Bank. We're also very fortunate to receive donations of bread and pastries from local bakeries as well as Whole Foods but it doesn't cover all the costs. Our food budget is stretched. Our chefs are amazing in the way that they can prepare economical meals but it's never quite enough. We always like to treat the women to extra-specials meals during the holidays as well as Mother's Day, Black History Month. We have a special outdoor barbecue in the summer called Sistabana. All of these events are so important for building community and for really respecting and giving dignity to the women who are using our services.

Marion Kane:

Who are the women using your services?

Wendy Bray:

When we became 24/7 our population of women accessing our services increased greatly.

Marion Kane:

By how much?

Wendy Bray:

Oh my gosh. I want to say probably the numbers tripled. When we first opened overnight we were seeing 20 women who were coming in and accessing soup and sandwiches overnight. We now see upwards of 70 women. We are one of only two spaces in Toronto, the other being Fred Victor who offer a woman-only 24/7 service for women who are homeless, who are precariously housed and living in poverty. Overnight we see many women who are sex workers who have nowhere else to go. We are seeing women who have complex mental health needs. We serve women who are falling through the cracks of our society. We're low-barrier which means that we do not turn anyone away. If you were to have been evicted from your apartment or your house and you arrive with your suitcase and your best friend who happens to be furry and four-legged, we welcome you.

Marion Kane:

You have a dog at your feet. You're dog-sitting.

Wendy Bray:

Yes, this is Licorice whose mom is a participant of Sistering and she had an appointment that she had to go to and so we're happy to step in and help whenever possible.

Marion Kane:

How does the low-barrier thing work? You accept everyone who comes to your door whether drunk or mentally ill or violent?

Wendy Bray:

Low-barrier means that we do not have any barriers in place that would hinder a woman's access to our services. Anyone who identifies as being a woman is welcome here. If you are using at the time, we will say, "Welcome, we are without judgement." If you walk through our doors we will not do a comprehensive intake. Instead we will say, "Welcome. What is it that you need? Are you hungry? Would you like to have a shower? Maybe you'd like a new pair of shoes." We are here to meet the needs of the women in our community.

Marion Kane:

What facilities do you have for bathing and toilets and overnight stays?

Wendy Bray:

We're very fortunate. We've just had some major renovations done in our drop-in space so we added 3 more showers to the space so we now have 4 showers for women. We have two more washrooms added and overnight we have 12 reclining chairs. So we hold a lottery at 10:00 a.m. in the morning and 10:00 p.m. at night to determine who gets to use the chairs for resting. For all the other women who are accessing our services we put down gymnastic mats or women might put together a couple of chairs and rest in that way.

Marion Kane:

Do you have a limit on numbers of women?

Wendy Bray:

Well, we will not turn anyone away. It's far more important for you to be safe inside of Sistering than sleeping on a park bench. And certainly with the cold weather coming we are more aware that the need increases.

Marion Kane:

What do you think of the situation that's a crisis in Toronto now?

Maureen Watson:

It is crazy because they are opening a lot of 24-hour drop-ins and I don't see that as a permanent solution. That's just a Band-Aid right now on the problem. I think what they need is more affordable housing, also assisted housing where they can get the help that they need to keep the housing if they do get it.

Marion Kane:

Food is up there with up there.

Maureen Watson:

Yes, food, the kitchen is the centre of the organization. The food for sure is the top of it.

Marion Kane:

How do you feel when you go home every day?

Maureen Watson:

I try not to take it home with me. It's hard but I try not to because if you take it home then you can't come in and cook a good meal so they can enjoy it if you take it home with you. So I try my best when I leave through the door I don't take it home with me.

Marion Kane:

Has it gotten worse, the situation of homeless women over the 11 years you've worked here?

Maureen Watson:

It has gotten worse. Right now at the 24-hour drop-in our capacity is supposed to be 50 and most nights we are getting 60 to 70 women.

Marion Kane:

Sleeping overnight in chairs?

Maureen Watson:

Sleeping overnight in chairs and also on mats on the floor.

Marion Kane:

I find it shocking.

Maureen Watson:

It's shocking but this is what Toronto is right now and we need help that is needed for these women that are coming in off the streets.

Marion Kane:

It's 2:20 in the afternoon now on a November day. I was here last week also and it was tense downstairs. It was crowded. I felt nervous. I'm a social worker by background, but I was nervous. I was reduced to tears actually. Today it is calmer. Do the days vary?

Wendy Bray:

The days always vary. We never know who might be coming or what someone is bringing with them. Our counselors are extremely well-trained to be able to de-escalate any situations that might happen but really we're all here. We all realize that we have to get along and we're all here to help one another.

Marion Kane:

There's a trickle-down effect of goodwill and wellbeing.

Wendy Bray:

Absolutely. I would say that every staff member who works here at Sistering has a huge heart and our priority is always putting the women first.

Marion Kane:

What do you need at Sistering? It's a crisis of space and funding.

Wendy Bray:

We're always happy to welcome monthly donors to Sistering. A gift each month guarantees food access for the women. A gift could be \$10.00 a month. We would love to have more monthly donors. We're also always in need of toiletries and items such as underwear for women. Underwear being all sizes preferably not white. Also we would greatly appreciate gift cards - grocery gift cards, gift cards to Walmart, gift cards to Tim Hortons. They're all used because in addition to helping women who are accessing our services in the drop-in we have eight cases workers who are working with families in the community - so women who have left violent situations and are now in new housing with their children but are struggling to make ends meet.

Marion Kane:

Sistering has moved several times over the years. Do you need more space?

Wendy Bray:

Well the numbers are increasing because the housing crisis is an issue here in Toronto, so yes we are bursting at the seams but I really see this as a bigger issue in that more and more affordable housing is needed for women. So that's our end goal is to be able to house the women who are coming to see us and if there was more affordable housing we would be able to get women set up quicker.

Marion Kane:

Do you want to say anything else?

Maureen Watson:

I enjoy the work I do at Sistering. I come in every day and I cook and I do the best I can and to know that the food that is prepared the ladies are enjoying. It really touches me.

Marion Kane:

It gives you a feeling of giving back.

Maureen Watson:

Yes, for sure. It definitely does.

Marion Kane:

Are you religious?

Maureen Watson:

I am. I am. (Laughs). I am.

Marion Kane:

Is it God's work?

Maureen Watson:

I would say so. I grew up with a religious family growing up so yes for sure.

Marion Kane:

I thank you for your service.

Maureen Watson:

You're welcome.

Theme Music

Marion Kane:

That was my conversation with Maureen Watson and Wendy Bray at Sistering in downtown Toronto. You can donate to support their work at sistering.org. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.

Theme Music