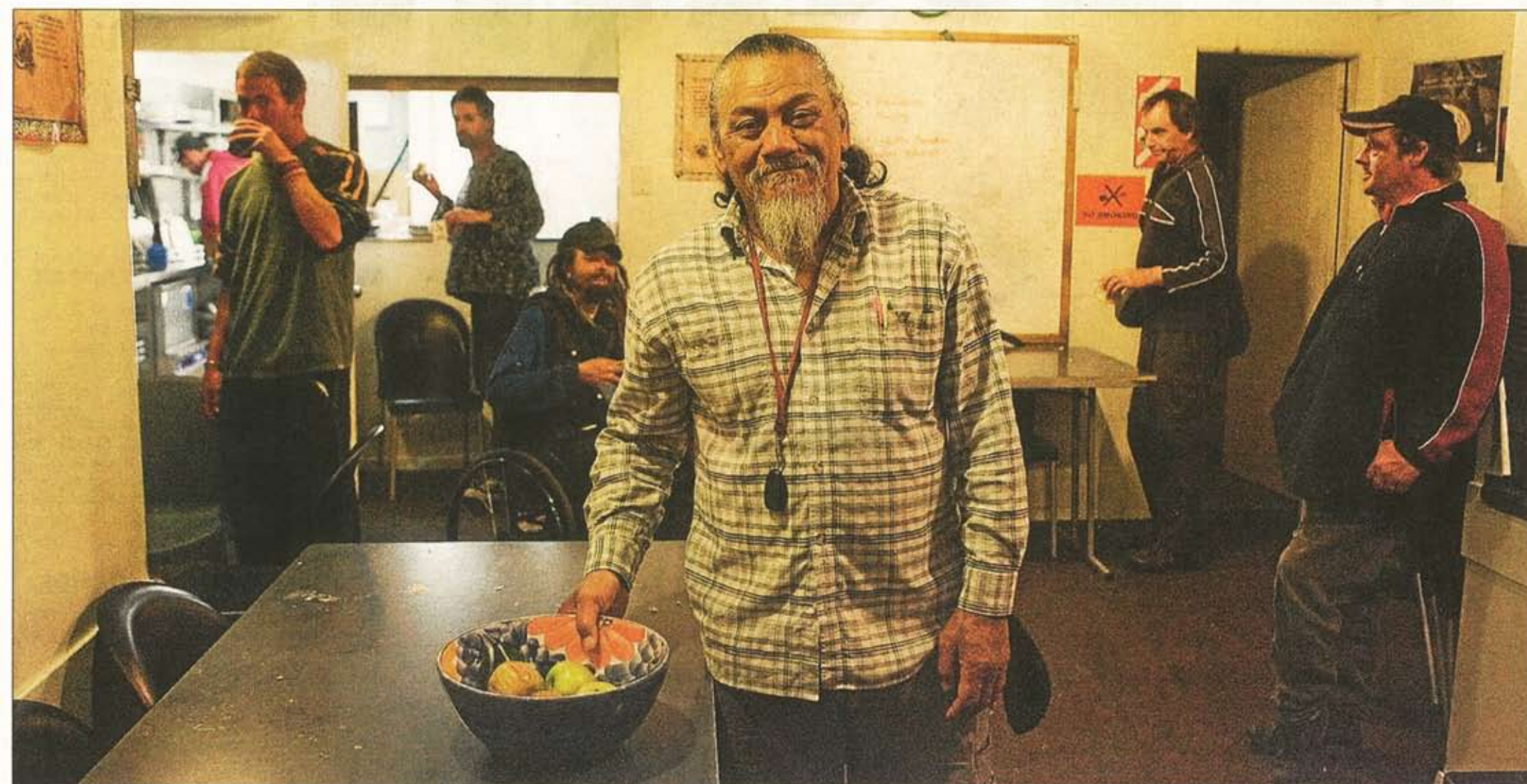


As the Christchurch City Mission raises money to build a \$10.5 million building, CHARLIE GATES spends a week finding out how the mission helps some of the most disadvantaged people in the city.



Lending a hand: Night shelter worker William Kapea cleans up after helping to feed people at the Christchurch City Mission last night.

Photo: DON SCOTT

Small oasis of calm for life's basics

Peter acts strangely during dinner. He is distracted – talking nonsense and giggling to himself.

He is one of about 23 people dining at the Christchurch City Mission night shelter. A delicious meal of salmon in a white sauce, green beans and roasted potatoes is being consumed with enthusiasm.

Peter is clearly enjoying his food, but something is definitely up.

The meal is over quickly and the diners form an efficient team to clear the tables, rinse the plates and load the dishwasher.

Peter, not his real name, sits next to night shelter attendant Phil Clarke, a man who oversees the night shelter with quiet authority. Amid the busy after-dinner clean up, Peter begins to talk. He starts telling Clarke about the abuse he encountered as a child and starts to cry.

Clarke consoles him and quickly catches the eye of supervisor Mary McGrath.

Peter is taken upstairs to a



small office in the night shelter to talk to McGrath, Clarke and social worker Gabor Radak.

He comes back downstairs about 30 minutes later, much calmer and more coherent. He has an application form for council housing in his hand and knows what mission services he can use like drug counselling and detox centres.

This is what happens at the night shelter. The food and shelter attracts people to the mission, then staff help them with their problems.

They help them get legal advice, a council house, medical attention and access to drug and alcohol counselling.

It later emerges that a man threatened Peter for his benefit money and took his cash card earlier that day. The same man banged on the door, asking to be

let in to the night shelter when staff members were upstairs talking to Peter.

When the man came in later, Clarke quietly asked him for Peter's cash card which was handed over immediately and without complaint.

Night shelter attendant Greg Lee says Peter's father was a chronic alcoholic and regularly stayed in the tank, a room at the night shelter where very drunk residents sleep on plastic-coated mattresses.

"He had a very rough upbringing. It is a very heartbreaking thing," says Lee.

The night shelter has 27 beds and can serve dinner for about 50 people a night in two sittings. The residents eat at about 5pm and then there is another sitting called the supper club for people who are not staying overnight.

Mission social services manager Gray Crawford says the night shelter provides "the real basics in life of food, accommodation, warmth and companionship for people who have nothing".

Food is prepared by volunteers with donated food. The salmon meal was donated and prepared by chefs from Air New Zealand's Koru Club.

James, not his real name, is one of the night shelter clients who does not stay overnight, but comes to catch up with friends over a cup of tea and a feed.

He chats openly about the night shelter as he prepares food in the kitchen.

Is there much trouble? "It depends how drunk people get. By the looks of that unconscious bloke there, quite a lot," he says.

"Most of these people will be the nicest people you will meet."

James piles four baking trays high with pastries, muffins and cupcakes donated by Christchurch bakeries. The muffins are pushed into pockets and packed into rucksacks by diners at the supper club, to be eaten later.

The muffins are one of many quiet kindnesses that help keep the mission running.

Over the evening a grey-

NIGHT SHELTER

- The night shelter housed 743 clients in 2009, compared to 688 in 2008.
- 6117 dinners were provided to residents in 2009.
- The shelter also provided 9517 dinners for non-residents, an increase of 1147 meals on the year before.
- Night shelter residents can access medical, legal and housing advice.
- Volunteers help cook the meals. The food is donated.
- A new housing support worker helps about five clients a month find a home.

haired man on a bicycle donates a bag of scones – something he does on his way home from work every night – and a man in a black bow tie and tuxedo drops off a tray of food on his way back from a Masonic

function. He is another regular donor.

When the doors lock automatically at 11pm there are six people sleeping in the bunk beds upstairs and four people still awake, talking quietly among themselves over sandwiches and cups of tea.

Like many places around the mission, the night shelter feels like a small oasis of calm.

Crawford says it is a haven for many people.

"It is a safe environment for the vulnerable of our community where there are no drugs or alcohol on the premises," he says.

With clear-headed sincerity, one person at the night shelter describes its importance in his life.

"This place is a lifesaver," he says. "If this place wasn't here, I wouldn't be either."

Tomorrow: Thorpe House social detox centre.

If you want to make a donation to the City Mission visit www.citymission.org.nz or call 0900 MISSION.