

## Cooking with Love

by T. Wayne Waters

Love Kitchen founders Helen Ashe (left), Director, and twin sister Ellen Turner, Manager, are delighted to still be serving up food and love at the Love Kitchen after 25 years.

It's a little past 8 a.m. on a Wednesday morning and 82-year-old twin sisters Helen Ashe and Ellen Turner are in the kitchen cracking eggs into wide-mouth wooden bowls. Brewing coffee infuses the air with an earthy aroma. Ellen gets a handheld electric mixer, plugs it in, and dips its shiny beaters into the yellow egg yolks in the bowl. A soft whirring sound signals the start of scrambled eggs. Helen meanwhile turns her attention from the eggs to white rounds of biscuit dough she begins to lay out on a large metal tray.

The breakfast Helen and Ellen are fixing isn't for them. It's for the dozens of needy Knoxville folks who come to this special kitchen on the east side of the city—the Love Kitchen—twice a week for a free meal, for delivery to the hundreds of people in need who have no way to get to Love Kitchen, and for the hundreds more who come by and pick up much-needed emergency food bags. These meals, cooked with care by the sisters and their volunteer staff, are for the hungry, the homeless, the helpless, the hopeless, and the homebound as the sisters like to say. Helen and Ellen have been doing it for 25 years.

Shortly, the rest of the Love Kitchen volunteers start shuffling in—men and women, black and white and shades in between, young and not so young. There are grits to boil, bacon and sausage to cook, more eggs to scramble, biscuits to bake and gravy to mix. Soon, the Love Kitchen is a hustle-bustle of activity, filled with the clang of pots and pans, metal trays slapped onto metal tables, and also with the aromas of life- and spirit-sustaining food, with conversation and laughter, with smiles and yes, love. The warmth in the room comes not only from the heated stoves.

### Sowing Seeds of Love

Helen and Ellen grew up poor in Abbeville, South Carolina. Their parents, John and Alice Liddell, were sharecroppers, and the twins came to know what work was very early. At the age of 8, they were washing dishes in the home of an area home builder, a chore they actually enjoyed because they didn't have running water at their own home. The work didn't end there, though. They also helped tend their own family's garden, raised the chickens, and milked the cow.

"We had the best parents that have ever been born on Earth!" exclaims Helen. "We didn't have much money but we never went hungry. We worked for what we got and we shared

what we did get. Daddy taught us to work.”

That’s not all their father taught his daughters. He also taught them what he considered the three most important truths in life: There is but one Father, our Heavenly Father; there is but one race, the human race; and never take the last piece of bread from the table because a stranger may come by and have need of it.

When the sisters graduated from high school in 1946 their father used the nickels and dimes he and their mother had saved to get Helen and Ellen their class rings and a bus ticket to someplace that would offer them the opportunity for a better life. The sisters decided to come to Knoxville where several of their aunts lived. They liked it and stayed. They got a job and tried to save as much money as they could to continue their education. Their first job was washing dishes at the grand S&W Cafeteria downtown. Eventually, Helen and Ellen were able to operate a tiny breakfast nook they named The Coffee Cup in a rented space on Vine Street and later a second restaurant called The Hickory Grill.

But the twins had bigger plans and entered into nurse training at Knoxville College. They earned their licensed practical nurse credentials and upon graduation went to work as nurses at the University of Tennessee Hospital. Helen worked with indigent patients on one floor and Ellen worked on another floor for paying African-American patients in those segregated times.

It was at the hospital, watching the plight of the indigent patients, where the germ of an idea took root in Helen’s mind, or perhaps it’s more accurate to say in her heart. Ellen remembers the very moment.

One day Helen said something was bothering her, recalls Ellen. Ellen asked what was the matter. Helen said, “When the indigent people come through the clinic. This little lady sat out there for five hours with nothing to eat and no money to buy anything. And another one had no food and no transportation or anything. One day, sis, I’m gonna have a place where all those people who need some food and need some help and transportation and everything can get it. I’m gonna fix it so they’ll have what they need.”

But Helen’s idea, which her sister wholeheartedly agreed with, had to wait. Meanwhile she and Ellen each married and in Helen’s case a child and several grandchildren and great grandchildren followed. Helen worked a total of 26 years at the hospital; Ellen 27. After they had both retired, Helen told her sister she was going to pray about how to help people like those she had tended to in the hospital.

### Love Offering

It took awhile for everything to fall into place, but eventually Helen and Ellen were able to begin making the dream a reality. The sisters started serving meals to those who would otherwise go hungry out of a small house in Knoxville on Feb. 13, 1986. They served 22 meals that first day. Thinking they might need more room, they approached the pastor of their church about letting them use the basement of the building to serve food to those in need. The church agreed initially but soon cut them off for fear of attracting “undesirables.”

It seemed no sooner had the sisters presented their initial love offering to the poor of Knoxville than they had to find a new place in which to offer it. But the feisty ladies would not be easily deterred. Helen and Ellen scrambled around in those very earliest days and

served food wherever they could until settling in for a time at the downtown YWCA. In 1991 then-mayor Victor Ashe (no relation to Helen) got the city of Knoxville to renovate an abandoned building on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and retrofit it with a large kitchen. The city of Knoxville rented the building to Love Kitchen for \$1 a year. The nonprofit organization run completely by unpaid volunteers finally had a permanent home.

Everything went pretty well for the Love Kitchen through the 1990s. By then, the number of volunteers helping the sisters had grown substantially. The organization had begun not only serving meals at its facility but also preparing take-home meals for those who could pick them up, as well as making meal deliveries for those who were homebound. Love Kitchen depended upon the good graces of concerned people in the community who were willing to devote time and energy for free as well as businesses and organizations willing and able to provide funds and food. The economy was good and Love Kitchen had all it needed for the time being. Unfortunately, times have a way of changing.

### The Darkest Hour is Just before the Dawn

Recent years have been tough economic times all over the nation, and it's taken its toll in East Tennessee. By 2008, Love Kitchen found itself in the increasingly perilous situation of greatly increased demand for its services coupled with a significant decrease in monetary contributions. By 2009, the facility had seen a 60 percent drop in donations and a nearly identical increase in demand.

In early October 2009, still-new Love Kitchen president and treasurer Patrick Riggins had the unpleasant task of telling the board of directors that despite the sisters' best efforts and all the other volunteers, the operation was running out of funds and would have to cut back services. Even then, Riggins grudgingly admitted, Love Kitchen would probably have to close its doors in 2010 unless it somehow raised at least \$40,000.

Despite the prognosis, Riggins and the sisters never gave up hope, remaining determined to keep serving up love on a plate just as long as they had plates to serve to folks in need. The situation was dire. Then a remarkable thing happened.

Local Knoxville television broadcasting station WBIR heard about Love Kitchen's plight and teamed up with radio station WIVK and several local Panera Bread restaurants to launch a well-publicized fund-raising campaign for the organization. WBIR had already done a feature on Love Kitchen that spring, which had garnered a little attention and a few donations for the organization, but the local dollars began pouring in with the new campaign. In just two weeks, the "Round up the Dough" benefit pulled in \$120,000 for the charity organization, as well as lots of food. WIVK radio listeners raised some \$8,000. Abingdon, Virginia-based Food City grocery chain added more than \$3,000 in gift cards to the Love Kitchen fundraising pot.

"We are so grateful for all the people—the volunteers, WBIR, WIVK, the people who gave money—everybody who helped us in our time of need," says Ellen with obvious emotion. "Everybody," she adds for emphasis. "We couldn't be doing this without them."

By the end of 2009, this long-standing Knoxville charity that had been on the cusp of collapse had received almost \$300,000 and was once again in good standing. The community had loved the Love Kitchen right back and Helen's dream was saved.

Love Kitchen's blessings continued to accumulate last year. Someone with NBC came

across the organization through its website and found the story irresistible. One thing led to another and suddenly NBC newsman Thanh Truong was in Knoxville with a camera crew filming the sisters and other volunteers going about their Love Kitchen activities. NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams aired the resulting two-minute "Making a Difference" segment in mid-October. More than \$7,000 in donations came in through the Love Kitchen website within hours of the broadcast. In the days that followed, thousands of dollars more in online contributions came in, as did about \$18,000 mailed to the facility. Eventually, more than \$45,000 in donations from all over the country resulted from the national TV broadcast.

Almost as valuable to Helen and Ellen as the monetary donations were the heartwarming notes that accompanied them.

"There were very inspirational notes with the donations," says Helen. "Don't you know that makes you feel good? Unbelievable, honey! It just makes you feel really good that so many people responded to what they saw on television. Praise God!" Ellen nods vigorously in agreement and voices a spirited "Yes, yes!"

Adding to the blessings, Food City came through this past autumn with \$6,000 more in gift cards.

### Everybody is God's Somebody

It has been with a hearty combination of grit and persistence, patience and kindness, all sweetened by their sunbeam smiles and lovable good natures that the remarkable octogenarian sisters have managed to draw volunteers and supporters through the years sufficient to keep the Love Kitchen going for a quarter-century. The sisters are quick to note that they couldn't have done it without their help.

"We couldn't get by without Patrick or without all our volunteers," says Ellen.

Love Kitchen gets lots of love itself in the form of local folks coming out to help the sisters do their righteous thing. Phi Gamma Delta fraternity members from the University of Tennessee have been coming to help out on Wednesdays for 18 years, longer than any other organization. Students from the Tennessee School for the Deaf pitch in every Wednesday and Thursday. Knoxville Baptist Christian School students come regularly. People from other area schools and organizations, Cherokee Health Systems and Scripps Networks among them, do their bit as well. There are also numerous individuals who assist the sisters on a regular basis, both in the kitchen and out delivering meals.

"We can feel the love from the community," says Helen. "We can feel their prayers. They pray with us and for us."

Love Kitchen still operates two days a week. Breakfast is served on Wednesdays and emergency food bags are distributed at the kitchen. Thursdays mean lunch at the kitchen and meal deliveries to those unable to get to 2418 Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard. These days Love Kitchen serves as many as 2,200 meals every week, more than three-quarters of them delivered to homebound recipients. The organization also sometimes supplies necessities like bath tissue and pre-owned clothing when needed and has been known in cases of extreme hardship to help out with rent or utility bills.

The Love Kitchen facility also houses a community room available to members of the community for training classes, club meetings, and as a safe haven for Knoxville's

underprivileged children.

Feb. 13 marks Love Kitchen's silver anniversary. President of the board of directors Riggins says there will probably be only a small commemoration on that date and a larger one sometime in the autumn.

For Helen and Ellen, the reason they do what they do, the reason they work these 12-hour days even in their 80s and despite health issues for both of them, is summed up in the Love Kitchen motto—"Everybody is God's Somebody."

### Spirit of volunteerism

It's Sunday, and Helen Ashe's and Ellen Turner's "grandson" Patrick Riggins is up early to make the rounds picking up donated food from various grocery stores in Knoxville. He takes the food to the Love Kitchen and properly stores it at the charity organization's facility. Often, he then tends to myriad other tasks that may include cleaning up, charting out the next

day's food deliveries or taking care of administrative paperwork.

"When people ask me where I go to church, I tell them I go to the Church of the Love Kitchen," Riggins says with a chuckle. "I'm here at least a couple of hours every day, seven days a week, including Sunday. You can get a lot done when there's no one else in here."

On Wednesdays and Thursdays when the kitchen is in full operational mode, Riggins often is also called upon to help serve food and prepare food bags to hand out or deliver. Occasionally, he fills in for a delivery volunteer who can't make it on a particular day.

The 42-year-old Knoxville native is a dedicated Love Kitchen volunteer who has also served as a very hands-on president of the board of directors for the past year and as treasurer for several years. It isn't unusual for him to devote 30 hours or more in a week to the charity. He is not actually Helen's and Ellen's grandson, a fact his pale, Caucasian complexion suggests. That designation is the sisters' way of expressing their special appreciation and love for the amiable, dedicated and unpaid volunteer.

"The sisters are great!" Riggins says. "They're really a source of inspiration. There are days when I wake up and think, 'Man, I don't want to go bother with this.' But when I do that I think to myself that if these two little ladies can get up and work down here for 12 to 14 hours then I can get up out of bed and do this a few hours every day."

Riggins' association with the Love Kitchen started when he filled in for his brother-in-law, supposedly only temporarily, who was running the food pick-up route five days a week but had to stop when his work shift changed. That was six years ago. His responsibilities have increased along the way.

"This is Helen's and Ellen's baby," says Riggins. "But Love Kitchen is a non-profit operation so there must be a board running it. Mainly, what we do is advise the sisters about various business-oriented things, about fund raising, about ways to do this or that. But as far as the day-to-day operations of the kitchen, that's pretty much Helen's and Ellen's show. They started this and they keep it running."

The Love Kitchen's 15-member board is made up of a diverse group of area business people and concerned citizens. Among them are a former television news anchor who is now with Scripps Network; a Knoxville Utilities Board member; a Food City grocery store chain executive; a local attorney; a business owner from neighboring Loudon County. In most cases, the board members are professionals who came to the Love Kitchen first as volunteers helping in the kitchen or on the delivery routes and were so impressed by the operation and its founders that they decided to dedicate their expertise to helping support it on the organizational level.

The Love Kitchen isn't the only recipient of Riggins' remarkable generosity. He has also been volunteering 20 to 30 hours most weeks for the past few years with the Knoxville Police Department as a reserve officer, another unpaid duty he takes on. Riggins devoted nearly 900 hours of service as a reserve officer in 2009 and was named Knoxville Police Department Reserve Officer of the Year that year by Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam and Knoxville Police Chief Sterling Owen.

It seems almost an afterthought for this extraordinary man, but Riggins makes his living as a freelance computer programmer. His primary company is called Advanced Open Source Software Solutions (AOS3). He also runs Audio/Video Website Technologies. For the record, both companies are essentially one-man operations and Riggins is not a wealthy man.

Riggins says he gets immense satisfaction out of all his volunteer activities but that the times he fills in for someone and runs a food-delivery route may provide the most satisfying moments of all.

"I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that I'm making a difference, that I'm helping people. I sometimes deliver food to the homebound and those people I feel especially good about helping because they might not see hardly anyone else all week. You come in and talk to them. I think sometimes that maybe this person is feeling bad and thinks no one cares and you show up and show them that someone does. It brightens their day. That makes me feel good to know that I can have that kind of bearing on someone."