

People

From Homeless to Helper: Toni Grady Offers Hope, with a Side of Chili

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There's a poignant reason behind **Toni Grady's** dedication to Chicago's homeless. She's been there herself.

"When I was a high school freshman, I came home one day to find everything on the street. My dad had left us. Mom and I suddenly had no place to live," the KPMG senior Tax processor recalls.

"I didn't tell anyone. I kept it to myself."

Today, the founder of "Keep the Homeless Warm" freely shares her story, her spirit, and her signature sustenance with her needy neighbors. It's her way of paying forward the good fortune she's enjoyed ever since her encounter with homelessness.

BBQ Banquet

Every other month, Grady's group of volunteers cart banquet tables and barbecue grills to the Near West Side. Vittles that include Cajun sandwiches (her catering business specialty), hamburgers, hotdogs, six kinds of chili and an array of lovingly home-cooked sides from baked beans to dirty rice are accompanied by donated vitals – from clothing, toiletries and blankets to non-perishable foods.

The feasts are deeply appreciated. But the inspirational example of Grady is mightily treasured. It serves as living proof that you can straddle the line between comfort and crisis – and return to achieve success.

"I was so unprepared for what happened," Grady now says of her high school experience. "I'd thought everything was ok in my family."

Shocked, Grady spent that day stuffing all her possessions into plastic bags. She accepted a neighbor's offer of shelter and bid a temporary farewell to her mother, the late Diane English, who was forced to share her own mother's cramped senior apartment. Brother Vernon English remained in his college dorm. All their furniture and countless personal belongings were removed by strangers or discarded as trash.

The Reunion

When the three reunited a year later, they were indelibly changed – for the better.

"My mother always helped people and that was instilled in me. She raised us right," says Grady.

Toni and Vernon went on to build fulfilling careers, as the nomadic year receded into memory. But when Grady and a group of lifelong friends stumbled upon a homeless encampment near the Chicago River two years ago, she recalled her own plight and knew she had to do something.

"I thought, 'Why not bring these people food on Sunday?'" the experienced cook remembers.



Toni Grady (bottom left in grey jacket) at a previous Sunday feast.



Six Times a Year

The response to their initial feast was memorable and touching and the group, accompanied by Grady's grill-master brother, Vernon, vowed to return every other month. Colleagues and additional volunteers pitched in.

"When I first attended, people were already gathered at 6:00 a.m. on one of the coldest days. Everyone was joyful and in great spirits." says Chicago HR Manager **Peju Akintorin**, whose own 'Agape Project' supports homeless women.

Warming every feast is Grady's unrelentingly positive outlook.

"Toni has been through it and that empathy drives her. It helps homeless people identify with and relate to her as someone who survived a tough situation and helps others, too," says Akintorin.

The same generosity of spirit infects Grady's KPMG colleagues.

"Toni has great communications skills. She's flexible, dedicated and willing to do anything for her team," enthuses her PML, Practice Operations Associate Director **Amy Mahan**.

For Grady, nourishing the soul is both second nature and an ongoing tribute to her mother; one that serves up its own small victories.

"Not long ago, someone we'd met at an early event came by, looking great. He told me he'd found a part-time job and a studio apartment," smile Grady. "There's hope out there."

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