

Kingston's 'Street Mom', the Kingston Street Mission, and the inconvenience of community service

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Marilyn McLean with some popular items at the Kingston Street Mission. Marilyn McLean is known to many as 'Street Mom.' Almost every evening from mid-November to mid-April, 'Mom' can be found at the Kingston Street Mission at St. Andrew's Church at the corner of Princess and Clergy Streets. She's the chair of that organization, volunteering her time to help the homeless, the impoverished, the marginalized, and, really, anyone who wants it, to get a bit of warmth, comfort, and community during Kingston's long, cold winters.

"I've got a lot of people that call me mom," said McLean. "In the daytime, I'm very active in their lives. I go to court with them, I go to probation with them, I go to CAS meetings, take them shopping, to the food bank, doctor's appointments — Whatever I can do in the day is what I do. We've been able to get some of them off the streets through that care and some of the other services they've been involved in. They're out of jail, they're off probation, they actually have their children and they're doing well. And that's really great. I also visit people in prison, and I write to them. I have a writing ministry that I do with a few prisoners."

McLean took an early retirement package from Rideaucrest two years ago, in part so she could focus on her volunteer work with the Kingston Street Mission and Lionhearts Inc., the organization that runs [The Embassy Live Music Cafe](#). She's at the Mission nearly every night of the week, except for Saturday nights when she's volunteering, and dancing and singing, at The Embassy.

“I was doing this while I was working,” said McLean. “Part of why I took my early retirement was because my mom was elderly and I needed to care for her until she passed away just a couple of months ago. But it was also because I wanted to be more involved in the lives of these people that come to the Mission, because a lot of the time, they’d say, ‘Hey, Mom, can you take me to the doctor tomorrow? I don’t want to go alone.’ And I’d say ‘No, sorry, I have to work.’ So now I don’t have to say I have to work. But I do have to check my calendar because I might be taking somebody else to the doctor.”



The doors to Gill Hall, where the Kingston Street Mission operates
 The Kingston Street Mission’s space, shared with The Mess



The Kingston Street Mission got its start in 1998 as a mobile truck that would drive around the downtown area at night, offering blankets, socks, hot soup or coffee, and also allowed people to sit inside and get warm. The truck eventually wore down and remained stationary, though semi-functional, on the south side of St. Andrew’s. Once the truck was completely beyond repair, they moved it inside to the basement of the church, where it now shares space with [The Mess](#), an art-based program that runs three afternoons a week designed for those affected by poverty, addiction, and mental and physical health issues.

“A couple of months after the Mission moved in here, I started volunteering one night a week,” said McLean. “Then I was finding out that on the other nights, people hadn’t been showing up to volunteer. And I thought, ‘Well, that’s not right. We need to be reliably open seven nights a week’. So I put my name on

the last-minute call list and I ended up coming in a lot. Then I was looking after all the volunteers, and eventually the whole thing.”

The Kingston Street Mission operates mostly independently in the space provided by St. Andrew's Church, Gill Hall, which is attached to the church, facing Clergy Street. It does its own volunteer recruitment and fundraising, and they source their own supplies. In addition to providing a safe, dry, warm, and welcoming space, they also distribute winter essentials like blankets, coats, toques, shoes, and even tents and sleeping bags, almost all of which is donated. Anyone attending the Mission can get a cup of coffee or hot chocolate (plenty of marshmallows are available), a bowl of soup or oatmeal, a cookie, a sandwich (peanut butter and jam is quite popular), or whatever other types of nourishment are available on any given night.

Last winter, the Mission saw up to 90 people on the coldest nights. Most nights, they'll see 40 to 45 people throughout the evening. They're open from 8 to 11:30 p.m. six nights a week, and on Saturdays, they merge the Mission with The Embassy and encourage attendees to head there where they can get a slice of pizza or a pastry, a drink (coffee, pop, or juice), and enjoy live music. Sunday nights, St. Andrew's volunteers and Kingston Street Mission volunteers work together to prepare full meals for anyone who would like one.

At the end of the night, on those long, cold mid-winter nights, McLean plans ahead for how to help the homeless once the Mission closes at 11:30 p.m.

"There are many nights where I'm downtown till all hours of the morning," said McLean. "The trunk of my car is like a store, really. I keep blankets, hand warmers, mitts, hats, lots of socks. My daughter goes with me a lot, and I have a couple of other volunteers who do it as well. We get to know the people and where they like to hide out, and we'll go to them and see what they need or get them a meal at McDonald's. We spend a lot of money at McDonald's. If people donate cash to us, I'll use some of it to buy McDonald's gift cards to hand out. When they leave here at 11:30 p.m., they can go there until 1:00 a.m. as long as they can have something to eat or drink while they sit there, and then they can go back as soon as McDonald's opens at 5:00 a.m. and have breakfast or a coffee. But between 1:00 and 5:00 a.m., they need somewhere to go."



Each night at the Mission, there is a minimum of three volunteers for the duration of the three-and-a-half-hour shift.

"For safety purposes, we have at least three volunteers per night," explained McLean. "Sometimes the volunteers will bring friends. We have a few Queen's students that help a lot, along with some Queen's grads that are now working, but will bring younger

students. We have seven or eight of them some nights, but during exams, we might just have the three.”

And while the Mission was created with the homeless in mind, anyone is welcome, regardless of where they live, their income, or criminal background. The only rules are that no one under 16 is permitted, and that everyone must be treated respectfully.

“A lot of the people who come to the mission aren’t necessarily homeless or living on the streets, but a lot of them have been on the streets, or have been back and forth,” said McLean. “Some people are socially isolated. They live in a little tiny room, and they really don’t have a lot so they come to us to maybe play cards or just talk. And they enjoy that very much. With the housing situation in Kingston, sometimes there is very little money left over after rent, even for a small room. So they come here to get food and snacks and some entertainment and social time.”

Though the Kingston Street Mission is mostly based in the space at St. Andrew’s, McLean and her volunteers also have an outreach program.

“I have a list of people who we know are at risk of being short of food,” said McLean. “I’ll pack up bags from some of the groceries that get donated to us. Last night, I had three bags of groceries, and I went to visit two people who used to be on the street, and now they finally have a place to live, but they don’t really have anything in their fridge. We’ll take blankets and socks to them, too, if they need it.”

So why does she do it? What drives Marilyn McLean to be ‘Street Mom’ to so many?

“I do it for several reasons,” said McLean. “I personally feel that this is my calling to do as a Christian. I also think we just need to help people. If there were more people helping, we could solve some of these problems. And there are a lot of other people helping around town, I’m not the only one. I could never do what I’m doing without all the support behind me of the volunteers and the community groups. I do speaking engagements, as well. And I’ve done a lot of those over the last year to offer some education regarding the stigma of homelessness. The less stigma there is, the more chance of helping there is.

“My biggest thing is just to try and get people to not judge, because we don’t know what brought a person to the place they are at. And it could be any of us at any time,” she continued. “We never know what our life is gonna throw at us. For me, I just want to follow in Jesus’s footsteps. This is what I believe he would be doing. He said, ‘The poor you will always have with you’. And we’re to take care of the poor and the orphans and the widows. But, you know, I just believe in helping people and I think actions speak a lot louder than words.”

McLean is always on the lookout for more volunteers. But she stresses that while anything helps, this type of community service is not for everyone.

“Sometimes you get a call at 2:00 a.m. that one of the regulars is suicidal,” said McLean. “You might get a call at 6:00 a.m. that somebody has died, or maybe there is a big stack of blankets that someone is getting rid of today and we need to go get them. Volunteering is being in service, whether you think it’s to the poor, or the Lord, or to the community, and being in service means a certain amount of self-sacrifice. Some things need to take priority over going to a movie or seeing a band, or there are real consequences.”

For those who can't donate their time, the Mission is happy to receive donations of clothing, blankets and other sleeping supplies (tents, sleeping pads, sleeping bags), and food items, especially snacks and things like instant coffees or soups. Monetary donations can be dropped off at the Mission, arranged through their Facebook pages, and tax receipts can be issued through St. Andrew's. The Mission has volunteers that are available to pick up donations as well, anywhere in the city.

"A lot of people say, 'I can't do what you do,'" said McLean. "And I say, 'You don't have to, but you can do something. You can write a letter to somebody. You can make a phone call to somebody. It doesn't have to necessarily people on the street. We have seniors in our community who are socially isolated and so alone. So get to know your neighbours a little bit. When you see that elderly man that you haven't seen all winter because he can't get out, go say hi. Just treat everybody like they're human, and treat them how you'd want to be treated."

To contact the Kingston Street Mission, please visit their [website](#).