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At home with Miss Joan

They don't have a place to live, or even a toothbrush. But with 85-year-old Joan Malone, they get the necessities, and much more.

By SUSAN ASCHOFF, Times Staff Writer
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ST. PETERSBURG

At 7:30 a.m., Joan Malone quickly shuffles to the back door and opens a wooden gate where almost two dozen men and women are waiting.

"Good morning, Miss Joan," comes a voice from the crowd.

They all begin talking at once.

The first in line shouts for them to be quiet. He says he has been here since 6 a.m., but no one has a watch. They've slept under bushes and scrounged in Dumpsters and now wait behind the homeless drop-in center for a shower, clean clothes and a cup of coffee.

Malone passes out 22 numbers, one to each man and woman in line. Then she goes inside and stands behind the desk, where she stands almost every weekday morning. There is a chair, but she stands.

"Hey, sweetie," she says. "Are you in our computer?"

The cubbies behind her are filled with towels and rolled-up sweat socks, deodorant and cream rinse.

"No toothbrushes, just toothpaste," Malone says.

Most of the people in line are regulars at ASAP Homeless Services Inc. Malone is, too. She has been coming here to help for 20 years. She knows their names. But she is 85, so sometimes she forgets.

She married and raised six children and earned two master's degrees and taught high school, and now she is rummaging in a bin for body lotion for a man who sleeps in an alley.

"They get to be part of your family," she says.

* * *

Malone arrived at the drop-in center just south of downtown this August morning at 6:49 a.m., fussing because she was four minutes late.

She unlocked the front door and made coffee, her hand shaking as she tipped the carafe.

She has done every job here. Fundraiser. Board member. Bookkeeper. Grant writer. Shower wrangler.

She first heard about ASAP in the mid 1980s as she walked from the Pier to the federal building in downtown St. Petersburg with a group protesting "the Contra situation" in Latin America. It was raining, and she shared an umbrella with Clare Hanrahan, founder of the nonprofit Advocates for Shelter Action Policy.

"I was struck by her honesty and her courage," Malone says.

She visited ASAP and was dispatched for groceries. She bought and paid for toilet paper and coffee and milk and whatever else they put on the list.

After Hanrahan left, Malone and a handful of others filled in the dicey gaps between directors. When donations slowed, Malone would talk to a newspaper columnist, a city official, a friend of a friend.

"We'd be on the brink, not knowing if we could pay the rent," she says. "Something always happened to pull us back from the edge."

There were about 4,700 homeless people in Pinellas County in January, according to a count by the Pinellas County Coalition for the Homeless.

These days, Malone says, she sees "more people who have had a couple years of college, people who lost their jobs and went through their savings. There's more young people. There's more veterans."

Malone is still the person who makes sure ASAP unlocks its door every morning.

* * *

The underwear is almost gone by 8:30 a.m. Malone unfolds a pair of briefs and holds them aloft for inspection. "Would you say these are good?" she says slyly. They are purple.

The client smiles and shakes his head no.

"I have some boxers," says Malone, waving another pair of underwear like a flag.

No boxers, he says.

Malone, dressed in blue jeans, navy Keds and a T-shirt that reads "Daisies: An American Tradition," digs through a bin of unmatched socks and proffers one when the washcloths run out.

Scoliosis curves her into a permanent stoop. She leans to the right. She pivots between the computer and a binder where she logs mail. At one point, she hoists a plastic garbage bag bulging with shoes and hauls it to another room. And she talks, amenably following a client's conversational non sequiturs.

Malone is a mother, both patient and bossy.

"She will tell you what she wants you to know," says executive director Karen Butler. One day Malone insisted that Butler call the plumber to repair a broken shower in one of the four bathrooms. Butler told

the less-than-happy Malone that there was no money in the budget.

Butler says Malone has earned the privilege of cajoling, pestering and, sometimes, forgetting. There are toothbrushes. Malone just forgot where they were.

"She's been a real big help to me," says Dino Scott, 39. He is homeless, he says, because he "just did a long stretch in prison." He leaves after showering, carrying a fishing pole. He says he'll cook what he catches at a nephew's house.

* * *

After years of Catholic schooling, Malone dropped out of college in New York and worked in a law library. She was 24 when she met Lee Malone in a "setup" arranged by one of her mother's friends.

He was a painter, she says, who didn't have time to paint. They married five months later, in 1945, so she could stay with him as he finished his Navy duty, then relocated to direct art museums in Ohio and Texas. They moved to St. Petersburg when he was named director of the Museum of Fine Arts, which he managed for 14 years. He died of cancer in 1989.

"He had such a wealth of knowledge. I learned so much from him," Malone says. As the wife of the museum director, she would cook for patrons and dignitaries. "It usually had chicken in it," she says.

Her husband, she says smiling, was more ruffled by the chaos of family than by the demands on an executive. "He lived in shock from the moment we got married and immediately started having children." They had three boys and three girls. "I think he had this idealized image of kids, that they would be introduced to your friends at a Sunday gathering, all dressed up and polite," she says.

"Kids are messy."

Malone was in her 50s, working part time at 16th Street Middle School, when she asked the assistant principal, "Do you think I could go back to school and get a teaching degree?" She attended the University of South Florida at the same time as five of her children and earned a bachelor's and two master's degrees.

She taught social studies at St. Petersburg High School for 15 years. She coached the school's tennis teams and later helped develop the youth programs at the St. Petersburg Tennis Center. She still plays when she can.

"I loved being in a classroom. I loved the exchange of ideas," she says. "The teenage years of my kids and their friends were so fascinating.

"Both the homeless and the teenagers have a lot of pain in their lives," she says.

When she was a child, she says, the nuns taught her that each person is worthy of respect. She watched her mother hand out sandwiches to the hungry who knocked on their door during the Depression.

Perhaps that's why she has stayed so long at ASAP.

"The lives they lead are very negative," she says of those without a home, "and to come here and get some comfort - that's the best thing I do."

* * *

At one of the circular clothing racks, Thomas Benning tries on a pair of like-new Dockers. A rack of ties is seemingly superfluous. "Sometimes they have to use them for belts," Malone explains.

She holds up a pair of enormous briefs. The intended recipient shakes his head. Another man joshes that he should tie a knot on the side to hold them up.

Three years ago, the center decided to pay Malone for 20 hours a week, mostly because she'd been working so long for free. Recently, an employee was punched in the back of the neck by a client. In the past, another was stabbed by a client who was off her medications. Malone says she is never frightened.

"There have been times when someone yelled at me and the others intervened," she says. "They protect me."

Around her swirls an odd ballet. Miguel Sanchez, pawing through pants on hangers, fastidiously moves a misplaced T-shirt to the correct rack. Another man stands nearby, angrily preaching to no one. Those fresh out of the showers grab deodorant and baby powder and move to a corner to spray armpits under a shirt or sprinkle talcum down the neck. Several carry loaves of donated sunflower seed and swirl bread.

Malone keeps things moving. She knocks on the bathroom doors. Shouts: "Anybody almost done?"

By 9:15 a.m., No. 25 is in the shower. Before day's end, 40 will be signed in.

The underwear cubby is down to two pairs.

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How you can help

The nonprofit ASAP Homeless Services Inc. operates a shelter and transitional housing for families as well as the drop-in center, where clients can shower, get fresh clothes, pick up mail and use the phone.

Last year, there were 4,000 visits for services.

ASAP needs financial donations, toilet paper, paper towels, coffee, towels, washcloths, combs, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, toothpaste, individual soaps, hair products, shaving cream, aftershave, skin lotion, spray deodorant, and men's and women's socks, belts, underwear and clothing.

For information, call 727 823-5665.

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