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## ORLANDO DIOCESE

# Open Table helps homeless youth

GLENDIA MEEKINS  
of the Florida Catholic staff

**VIERA** | Forty years ago Deacon Mike McElwee's family accepted an invitation from Catholic Charities and the Diocese of Richmond to help resettle a Cambodian refugee family.

They and three other families accompanied the immigrants for one year, helping them become independent. The families still stay in touch.

That experience drew Deacon McElwee into Open Table at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Viera. When Holy Cross Father John Britto, parochial administrator, approached him to lead the initiative, the deacon was all in.

"I had experienced the value of walking with people in their need, forming relationships. And out of relationships you come up with a plan and a path forward," Deacon McElwee recalled.

In 2018 the parish launched Open Table, a national ministry that seeks to transform the lives of those who are homeless or living in poverty one person at a time. Working with Catholic Charities of Central Florida, who recommended Crosswinds Youth Services, a shelter for homeless youth ages 18 to 22, Table One members met their "friend" — Brandon Brooks, who was close to finishing high school. His father suffered from dementia and moved back to his hometown in England, leaving Brooks to fend for himself.

"He had the where-with-all to find Crosswinds and entered into their transitional living program," Deacon McElwee said.

Brooks recalled their first Table meeting. Being somewhat of an introvert, he was a little shy and not sure he could trust these strangers. To his surprise, they shared some of their life experiences.

"Every one of them told their whole story, good and bad, light and dark. I absolutely loved it. Not a lot of people do that," Brooks said. "It's very important as reciprocation," he added. Their honesty put him at ease and encouraged him to share his story and how they could help him.

"They helped me with basically every need I could think of. They made me feel very comfortable," he noted. "It was grand. We got to know each other, and I actually miss them. I really do. They're my friends and they're my family. I'll always cherish them."

The table members helped Brooks get organized, identify goals and plan steps to achieve them. Through their "social capital", each member's strengths, they found ways to help Brooks help himself. He finished high school, enrolled in college and applied for grants. He also reconnected with family. When COVID-19 caused his school to temporarily shut down and his job to cut his hours, he reached out to relatives in Mexico. With the support and encouragement of his Table members, he relocated there.

"He has really thrived," Deacon McElwee said. "Now he has stability. He is with his family. He's a delightful young man." Brooks is forever grateful. "They helped me reflect on and resolve many things. It had a great impact on me," he noted.

Catholic Charities President Gary Tester noted, "The Open Table provides parishioners a unique relationship building opportunity with an individual or family needing a social network of support as they work to piece their lives back together. Many of us search for ways to make a difference — the Open Table only requires time and talent. Partnerships such as the one between Catholic Charities of Central Florida and St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church open that door of opportunity for caring persons to truly make a difference. In this case, the partnership with Crosswinds serves a target



St. John the Evangelist's first Open Table successfully helped Brandon Brooks, seen second from right, with Pete and Cindy LaMonica, far left, John and Kathy Drake, Father John Britto and Sandy Samuel. (COURTESY)

population of need and creates relationships that positively impact everyone involved. This is truly an example of being the hands and feet of Jesus."

Currently 12 parishes in the Diocese of Orlando have an Open Table ministry. The volunteer commitment of one hour per week for one year is both challenging and rewarding. Not all stories end like Brooks'. Deacon McElwee said most of the youth have trust issues brought on by life experiences and that's an obstacle to building relationships.

"It's painful to hear what some of these young people have experienced," he shared.

Yet this is also the beauty of it according to Father Britto. "Our people's eyes are opened to the reality of poverty, homelessness, and abuse which they may not have encountered," he said. "Some of them are shocked to know such things exist. They come to understand that as Catholics, we have a long history of caring for people in need. We fight for justice."

Deacon McElwee said the larger community also benefits. The ministry reaches out to each candidate as a child of God without judgment, helping to solidify relationships with other agencies.

"These are young adults who are coming of age and need to learn a lot of stuff that usually families would teach, but these kids have been cut loose. They're on their own and are having to make it up as they go along," he said, reiterating how Open Table members offer guidance and tools. "It's not 100%. Ultimately, they make their own decisions and sometimes that means making the wrong decisions, but then learning from it and going on. That's where our tables have been great. The people are very patient."

Parishioners have completed five tables, graduated all youth, and have three more tables currently in progress.

"This is what Christ expects of us—to be a good shepherd, our brother's keeper, to take on challenges in a world that has gone crazy," Father Britto said. "Christ loves to have us love, not only God — but that the love of God is manifested in the way we love neighbors and total strangers. It is a great example." ■

If your parish is interested in learning more about Open Table, contact Gary Tester at [GTester@cflcc.org](mailto:GTester@cflcc.org) or call 407-658-1818.