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Justices offer up steaks and jazz for the homeless

By KATE HAMMER

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Turning up the earflaps of his winter hat and unzipping his coat, Cliff Wind settled into his chair at a cafeteria table in the basement of Osgoode Hall. A wisp of a man composed of equal parts flesh, bone and beard, he'd been standing in the cold with hundreds of Toronto's hungry and homeless for nearly four hours waiting for a hot meal. When the filet mignon coated with gravy and snuggled between green beans and French fries was placed on the table in front of him, he grinned.

"I haven't had filet mignon in 20 years. It is the best meat in the world," he said, his 53-year-old eyes widening behind a thick pair of glasses.

Delicately, he cut a generous bite, stabbed it with his plastic fork and slipped it into his mouth. His eyes narrowed and his beard bobbed as he chewed in silence for several seconds.

"It's very good," he decreed at last. "It would be even nicer if I had teeth."

Mr. Wind held the 29th of 600 tickets handed out yesterday for the Lawyers Feed the Hungry Program Christmas dinner. Each ticket granted the bearer entrance to Osgoode Hall, where a filet mignon dinner, bread pudding, a live jazz band, new socks and a crisp \$10 bill awaited.

Dinner began at 5 p.m., but, nearly an hour before, the line outside Osgoode Hall stretched around the building to University Avenue, and people had to be turned away as all 600 tickets had been dispensed.

After shivering in line for two hours, John Chesson, 60, was one of those lucky enough to secure a ticket. He smiled when, while waiting outside, he learned that Ontario Chief Justice Warren Winkler would be one of his servers.

"I'm a former client," he said.

Nearly 20 years ago, Mr. Chesson said he was sentenced by a judge, now known as Chief Justice Winkler, to four years in prison for bank robbery. (Mr. Chesson says he was innocent.)

"Can I get a pardon with my steak?" he asked.

A short time later, Chief Justice Winkler, who padded about on brown loafers while balancing trays stacked with filet mignon, chuckled at the suggestion of steaks served with a side of pardon.

"I think that's a dandy idea," he joked, and then, after a quiet pause of judicial contemplation, he added, "Well, maybe half-pardons."

Chief Justice Winkler is a close friend of Martin Teplitsky, the founder of the program, who arrived with \$6,000 cash in a flimsy grocery bag.

As is tradition with the 11-year-old program, Mr. Teplitsky paid for the steaks and handed out \$10 of his own money to 600 diners.

The funds, for many, are the main attraction, and several eager patrons tried to bypass the meal, steamrolling directly toward the exit where Mr. Teplitsky handed out crisp purple bank notes.

Each was rerouted by a friendly, strategically placed volunteer.

Mr. Teplitsky has been criticized over the years for the extravagance of his annual Christmas feast. A hugely successful lawyer who dislikes the label "foodie" because he feels it denotes a certain culinary elitism he lacks, Mr. Teplitsky bristles at the notion that charity meals can't include gourmet ingredients.

Mr. Wind, after dabbing drops of gravy from the corners of his beard, agreed.

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