

The Friends of Jean Webster, Inc.



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Ms. Jean Webster, Founder

Rev. John R. Scotland, Ex. Dir.

Dear Friends,

February 4, 2019

As a faithful supporter of the work at Jean Webster's Kitchen, we are writing with heavy hearts to advise you of current difficulties now confronting the Kitchen. Our mission to serve those in need in our community began when Jean Webster saw a man eating out of a dumpster and took him into her home and fed him. Soon Jean fed others as well, eventually moving to the Presbyterian Church at the corner of Pennsylvania and Pacific Avenues in Atlantic City. Since that move over twenty years ago, we have served over a million and a half meals to brothers and sisters in need. Inspired by Jean, we do this with no pre-conditions or questions asked about one's religious beliefs or lack thereof, or sexual orientation, or nationality. We also do this without a dime of money from Atlantic City, relying on the support of our faithful donors. Unfortunately, our work may be about to come to an end.

Since the creation of the Casino Tourism District in Atlantic City, it has been made clear to us that government officials are unhappy with the Kitchen being at the location where we have operated for over twenty years. The picture of poor people lined up for food next to the opulence of a casino hotel has created an image problem for the City. We understand the practical concerns of City officials and for at least five years have been looking for a place to relocate outside of the Tourism District. Over that time we explored moving to several different sites, but each time we identified a possible new location, the prospect of moving was met with opposition.

Then in 2017, it seemed that our prayers had been answered. St. Monica's Church two and a half blocks away on North Pennsylvania Ave. outside the Tourism District became available. We worked with representatives of Atlantic City Mayor Don Guardian's office and the Atlantic City Planning Dept. who encouraged us to buy the property. We also secured a Resolution from the CRDA Board of Directors reserving funds to assist us in making necessary renovations to the property. With this encouragement, we purchased the property by using the limited reserve funds and taking out a substantial mortgage loan. We met with people in the neighborhood and obtained site plan approval from the Atlantic City Planning Board.

At that time everything looked very encouraging for our future. And then everything changed. As a result of the mayoral election in 2017, Mayor Guardian was succeeded by Mayor Frank Gilliam. Mayor Gilliam soon let it be known that he was unalterably opposed to our relocation to St. Monica's, and publicly stated that he would work to close down our current location. As a result, we own a property we acquired with the encouragement of City officials that we cannot use.

"God told me to feed the people"

- Jean Webster, 1987

Despite what we believed was extraordinarily unfair, we told Mayor Gilliam in a face to face conversation that we would look for another property that would not be objectionable to him. Shortly after that conversation we wrote Mayor Gilliam and asked if he would designate someone from his administration with whom we could work in this effort. We also asked for his guidance concerning what areas of the City we should avoid in our search. We never received the courtesy of a response to our letter. Not having heard from the Mayor we then set out on our own to identify possible relocation sites. After three months we sent the Mayor another letter identifying several properties and asked if he would advise us if he found any acceptable. We never received the courtesy of a response to that letter either.

Although we are not a government agency and receive no funds from Atlantic City, it is clear that the Mayor intends to shut us down. This week we received a notice to vacate from City code officials telling us that the church where we operate is unsafe. We are working to see if we can find a temporary location in another house of faith to keep feeding our guests through this cold winter and to keep Jean Webster's dream alive. We are open to invitations from any house of faith in the city. Hopefully, we will be successful. But if we are not successful, we may be forced to end Jean's dream as we will simply have no place to go.

We have written this letter to keep you, our supporters, informed of the state of things at the Kitchen. We are not fundraising or looking for contributions. We appreciate your prayers as we try to continue our important work. Should we not be able to continue we also want to express our lasting gratitude for what you have done to support Jean Webster's dream over many years. Thank you, and God bless you.

Rev. John R. Scotland, Exec. Dir.

Ms. Linda Carney, Board Chair