

All you can contribute

'Virtual diner' turns fantasy meal into a real donation

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Dressed in a black cape, white diner apron, black mask and a propeller beanie cap, a Wolcott man and his Watertown sidekick arrived in a blue Miata convertible Jan. 21 at the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen with a donation of \$250.

It was the start of what the pair says is an innovative, Web-based method to get people to donate to the poor money they would have otherwise spent on a meal.

Rich DiGirolamo, a motivational speaker/consultant, created One Less Meal to encourage people to divert money they spend eating out to feed the hungry.

To that end, he and a friend, Michelle Gotay of Watertown, created the "Double D," a "virtual diner" online, complete with menu and a video of a gum-popping waitress, where people can "order" a meal and the final tab is donated to local and national charities.

"It was very timely," said Paul Scapolino, food service director at the soup kitchen. "It was something I never heard of and when I went on their Web site afterward it seemed like a special thing. It's nice to see people do things like that and they did it in a fun way."

"I don't think most people know what hunger is all about," DiGirolamo said. "We're all giving [donations] at the holidays at the end of the year, and then what happens? Food insecurity goes out of people's minds after the holidays."

The Web site began on Jan. 13.

The idea started last year when DiGirolamo was sitting on a Rhode Island beach, watching two women whittle away



CONTRIBUTED

Rich DiGirolamo and Michelle Gotay, in costume, deliver a donation to the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen.

at a couple of bags of snacks.

"They were just munching away, munching away, wolfing down these bags of snacks," said DiGirolamo, who goes by the name "Clyde" on the virtual "Double D Diner." As noon approached, one woman looked at the other, said she was getting hungry and that the pair should get some lunch.

DiGirolamo was flabbergasted. "I was like, 'how could they possibly be hungry after eating all that crap?'"

After making a snide remark to himself about how the women could do with one less meal, DiGirolamo said, "I thought about the number of people in this country who go to bed hungry, as well as the obesity crisis, and the rest was history."

DiGirolamo determined that if he could get Americans to donate the money they might have spent on a meal, he could help make a dent in hunger. Last year, the government reported that 49.1 million Americans suffered from "food insecurity" at the end of 2008.

So he and Gotay created the Double D Diner, where patrons "order" a meal

from a typical diner menu, but the money actually gets remitted to food banks or soup kitchens throughout the U.S.

Patrons who go on the group's web site, <http://onelessmeal.org>, are greeted by a video of a waitress, Earlene, played by Gotay, order a meal (like Flapplejacks or Fries for Guys and Women's Thighs), pay for it, and leave the diner. The pair call the site the Double-D diner because "you don't eat it, you donate it."

"You can come in for a cup of coffee for \$1.89 and leave and you've donated that money," Gotay said. "Nobody would write a check for \$1.89, but this way you can do something good and feel great about it."

The pair say they are applying for a 501(c) 3 tax exemption and plan to change the menu items and videos frequently.

"I'm fortunate," DiGirolamo said. "There's always plenty of food on my table. There's always more than enough food on this table. It's one of these things that I realize that I really took for granted. I had reached a point in my life where I was looking for a big giveback."

"I DON'T THINK MOST PEOPLE KNOW WHAT HUNGER IS ALL ABOUT. WE'RE ALL GIVING (DONATIONS) AT THE HOLIDAYS AT THE END OF THE YEAR, AND THEN WHAT HAPPENS? FOOD INSECURITY GOES OUT OF PEOPLE'S MINDS AFTER THE HOLIDAYS."

RICH DIGIROLAMO | MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER/CONSULTANT, CREATOR OF ONE LESS MEAL