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## News

## Lawrence

By **Stephanie Akin**  
Staff Writer

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**LAWRENCE** — Volunteers led by a local priest with show business, big league sports and business connections has raised almost \$900,000 to build a seven-day-a-week meal center for the poor that will serve up to 750 meals a day.

"We really believe that food and nutrition are a basic human right," said the Rev. Paul O'Brien, pastor of St. Patrick Parish, who spearheaded the project. "It is really impossible to expect change for a lot of social problems we have in Lawrence if people remain hungry."

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston will donate all construction costs over \$900,000 for the building, which is estimated to cost \$1.4 million. Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley was to announce the Archdiocese's commitment to the project at a noon press conference today in Lawrence.

Terry Donilon, spokesman for the archdiocese, said the project "gets to the core mission of the church" and was the perfect outlet for money the church is re-allocating as it closes churches throughout the Boston area.

In 1999, the most recent year for which figures available from the U.S. Census, more than 24 percent of Lawrence's population was living below the poverty line. Last year, 85 percent of the city's public school children qualified as low-income, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education.

"Childhood hunger, poverty, hunger in general are a major focus for the archbishop and the archbishop basically felt this was a project that couldn't have been done without us committing to it," Donilon said.

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The rest of the money is almost all in the bank. After about two years of researching the need for a meal center in South Lawrence, the group raised more than \$800,000 in less two years. Half of the money came from private donors and foundations. The other half was raised through a savvy concept using volunteer teenage "street teams" to sell T-shirts and collect donations.

The meal center will be called Cor Unum, Latin for "One Heart."

When it is finished in early 2006, the center will be the only one serving meals on Lawrence's south side, where there are more than 19,000 households.

Architectural drawings depict an attractive one-story building and a bronze roof with a patina to match the roof of St. Patrick's Church next door. It will be built on a Carver Street lot the church has been using for overflow parking.

Rather than lining up for food, diners will be served at round tables, O'Brien said. After they dine, they will have the option of volunteering to serve those who eat after them.

"Poor people are seldom asked would they please help serve other people," O'Brien said. "It's a basic part of human dignity, to serve other people."

Groundbreaking on the 5,600-square-foot building is projected for early November. The center should be open by spring, 2006, O'Brien said. By that time, backers hope to have raised an additional \$400,000 to pay for the first two years' operating costs. The center will rely on volunteers, except for one paid employee.

The T-shirts, which O'Brien hopes will help raise most of the money for the facility's operating budget, are printed with labels such as "addict," "prisoner," "troubled teen," "mentally ill," and "geek."

They are meant to question social stigmas. But their typewriter font and black-and-red color schemes look so hip they could easily be mistaken for concert tees. They cost \$22, and all proceeds go to Cor Unum.

The design and marketing campaign behind the "Labels are for Jars" T-shirt project enlisted the aid of such high-profile figures as comedian Conan O'Brien, who was O'Brien's college roommate at Harvard but is no relation; Cincinnati Reds pitcher Sean Casey; and Michael Toth, whose Concord-based company is responsible for building the brand images of such powerhouse companies as J.Crew and Tommy Hilfiger.

All three men are friends of O'Brien, a Harvard graduate who

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worked alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta before he came to Lawrence to work at St. Patrick in 2001.

As of August, the shirts are being sold at Newbury Comics, a music store chain with a reputation for stocking edgy, independent music. In its 25-year history, the company has never sold products to raise money for charity. But founder and CEO Michael Dreese made an exception for this project, setting up display tables for the shirts and collection jars to "feed the hungry in Lawrence" in four of his stores, including the flagship location on Newbury Street in Boston.

Lisa Fehl-Parrette, Dreese's assistant, said the company was introduced to the project by "a friend of a friend."

"When we met Father Paul, we thought he was amazing, bright, a visionary," she said. "We believe in supporting projects that have good people behind them."

Through its Web site, Labels are for Jars has sold shirts in countries such as Denmark, Ireland, Great Britain and all across the United States.

O'Brien downplays the importance of his high-profile connections.

"It's people with a lot of gifts who happen to have national profiles and have given their time," he said.

The support of local community leaders has been as important and valuable in anyone's, he said.

"If a group of people have an good idea, a really good idea, for that idea to become a reality they have to work and work and work," he said. "You have to involve everybody who should be involved from the get go."

Robert Lanzoni, director of Bread and Roses, one of two soup kitchens in Lawrence, said O'Brien's goal of serving meals 365 days a year is an ambitious one. Bread and Roses has a network of more than 100 volunteers and serves dinners only and only five nights a week but still has trouble making ends meet.

"I know how difficult it is to serve 150 meals a day five nights a week," said Lanzoni, who said he has not met O'Brien. "Seeing how many volunteers it does take for that to happen here, which I think is a major accomplishment. I know he has his work cut out for him."

Lana Schofield, director of communications at Lazarus House, said it has had a 25 percent increase in visitors to their soup kitchen and food pantry in the month since Hurricane Katrina as people try to stretch paychecks to cover higher gas prices and other expenses. Money and food donations have gone down in the same time as aid efforts

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have been focused on the Gulf Coast, she said.

"Lazarus House supports and embraces anyone in our community who is willing to help those who are poor," she said. "Our only concern is, especially with Katrina, do we have enough food donations to support soup kitchens in Lawrence?"

O'Brien said his experience raising money for Cor Unum has taught him that concern for the hungry and the poor in Lawrence can be mined far beyond the city's borders.

"People are willing to sacrifice to make this work," he said.

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