



Conan, the humanitarian

By DEBBIE HOVANASIAN, Sun Correspondent

LAWRENCE -- It's a no-brainer for late-night comedian Conan O'Brien when it comes to feeding the hungry.

"Feeding hungry people ... in an area that needs help? Why not? You've got to do it," he said yesterday at the dedication ceremony for the new Cor Unum Meal Center on South

Broadway Road.

O'Brien, host of Late Night with Conan O'Brien and the scheduled heir to The Tonight Show throne when Jay Leno retires in 2009, was in Lawrence over the weekend to help another O'Brien, the Rev. Paul, pastor of St. Patrick Church in Lawrence, dedicate the meal center during a ribbon-cutting and bread-breaking ceremony.

Though the two O'Briens are not related, they share a strong friendship that began when they were housemates while studying at Harvard University.

And when it comes to raising money to help feed families in the poorest community in Massachusetts, and one of the poorest in the country, "it helps to have Conan O'Brien as your best friend," said Rev. O'Brien with a smile.

Conan O'Brien, a Brookline native who currently lives in New York City with his wife, Liza, and their two children, is among the first of several friends Fr. O'Brien turned to in 2001 to brainstorm ways to eradicate hunger.

In Lawrence, three out of four children are at risk for hunger, and half of children under 18 live below the poverty line. Of a population of just over 82,000 people, 69 percent are Hispanic, many having immigrated to the United States.

The group of friends created Labels Are For Jars, a program designed to raise money through the sale of T-shirts and private donations, while also putting the spotlight on societal labeling. Eye-catching black T-shirts with negative labels, such as addict, minority, prisoner or slacker, seek to undermine such labeling.

Labels Are For Jars has raised \$775,000 toward the \$1.5 million cost of the meal center. Remaining funds were raised through corporate donations, private donations and the Archdiocese of Boston.

While showing a serious side in talking about the devastating problem of hunger, that same

quick sense of humor that keeps O'Brien's viewers riveted into the early-morning hours occasionally came through.

When asked if he'd be doing any cooking at the center, he was clear on where he stood. "I can make Bumble Bee tuna on toast," he deadpanned.

In fact, if he did the cooking, he assured everyone that "the center would shut down in 15 minutes."

No matter. Lending his time, talent and treasure to a project that will provide three nutritional meals seven days a week, 365 days a year, to up to 250 hungry people per meal is quite enough. Cooking experience not necessary.

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