

HOLY CROSS MAGAZINE

Peeling Labels: Susan '77 and Mike Toth '74 and Luke O'Brien '84 work to feed the hungry

By Rebecca Smith '99

When Rev. Paul O'Brien called on Michael '74 and Susan Toth '77 to help fight hunger in Lawrence, Mass., the couple was eager to assist their friend. In fact, they thought so highly of the priest that, when he was transferred from their parish in Concord, Mass., to Lawrence's St. Patrick Parish, they traveled there to celebrate Mass with him every Sunday. And while worshiping in the impoverished community, the Toths got to know their fellow parishioners and felt obligated to help them.

"There were faces to this concept that would haunt us if we didn't do anything," explains Mike Toth.

As a pastor in the state's poorest city, Fr. Paul's idea was to sell T-shirts to raise money to build a food center. He brought in the Toths for their support, creativity and branding expertise. A fine arts major at Holy Cross, Mike Toth is president and chief executive officer of Toth Brand Imaging, whose clients include Tommy Hilfiger and J. Crew.



Discussing with the Toths the pervasive problem of societal labeling, Fr. Paul explained that people in his parish—such as ex-convicts and recovering drug addicts—were trying to make a fresh start but were being held back by stigmas that others assigned to them. It was out of this concept that the Toths brainstormed an innovative branding idea: Labels are for jars—not people. They designed thought-provoking T-shirts with derogatory labels on them, such as "homeless," "prisoner" and "geek." At the Toths' suggestion, the shirts are sold in jars, which can be filled with money that is then donated to the food center. T-shirts are sold at www.labelsareforjars.org and select Newbury Comics stores.

"We worked off the idea that food comes in jars," says Mike Toth. "So it's symbolic to fill a jar with money that goes toward feeding the hungry."

Labels are for Jars is a wildly successful grassroots campaign. To add backing to the project, Fr. Paul called on his connections with Cincinnati Reds first baseman Sean Casey and former Harvard housemate, late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien, to help spread the word. Conan O'Brien's brother, Luke '84, who had befriended Fr. Paul years earlier, willingly lends his expertise as an attorney to the organization. Director and counsel of Secure Record Services in Boston, O'Brien feels compelled to help Fr. Paul—and the Lawrence community.

"There are a lot of complex issues in this world that are hard to deal with," explains Luke O'Brien. "This one is especially close and palpable—and it's a relatively easy one to fix: People are hungry, so let's feed them."

Looking back to his time at the College, O'Brien recalls a strong emphasis on community.

"Mike and I are both proud to have gone to Holy Cross because it instills in people the idea that it's our duty to help others," says O'Brien. "And that's what living a good life is about."

In September, Labels are for Jars—together with corporate and private donors and the Archdiocese of Boston—raised \$1.4 million to establish the Cor Unum ("One Heart") Meal Center. Set to open in 2006, the group is now raising funds for the Center's operational expenses.