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## **Peeling labels to feed the hungry**

**By Yadira Betances**

*Staff Writer*

Members of St. Patrick Church in Lawrence are hoping to feed 250 people three hot meals a day, seven days a week.

To help do so, they are selling T-shirts designed to raise awareness about the damage caused by negative stereotypes that demean some of the people who may benefit from the meal center.

The Rev. Paul O'Brien thought using T-shirts to dispel stigma for former prisoners and addicts who currently live in Lawrence could work to their benefit while raising funds for the center.

"I thought about what it is was like to be labeled a prisoner, both literally and figuratively, and how that label follows a person even after they are out of prison," he said of his idea.

O'Brien, pastor at St. Patrick, pointed out that it's not just former prisoners and drug addicts who are looking for food in the homeless shelter and soup kitchen in the city's north side.

He said most people who go hungry in Lawrence are working families with children and the elderly, who have to make choices between paying rent and buying groceries.

O'Brien presented his idea to friends, including comedian Conan O'Brien, who was the priest's roommate at Harvard University; All-Star baseball player Sean Casey; and Michael Toth, who owns Toth Brand Imaging in Concord.

The four men and other committee members worked together to come up with the concept of Labels are for Jars, T-shirts displaying one or

two words like "Addict," "Mentally Ill," "Minority," "Prisoner," "Troubled Teen," "Geek" and "Illegal Immigrant."

The hope is that wearers will gain empathy for people who live with negative stigmatism.

The word or words in black ink on a white label resemble those on a jam jar. "Labels Are for Jars.org" is printed on the back of the shirts.

"We didn't want something that was negative. This is what real people feel as a result of prejudging," said Toth, who is printing the T-shirts.

"When a teen wears the "Addict" shirt and goes out on the street, we found that they are treated different," he said. "It's like walking a mile in someone else's shoes."

The shirt is sold rolled up in a plastic jar with a large coin slot on the top. The front of the jar has the same label as the shirt. The back reads, "Every nickel we make from the sale of this shirt helps feed hungry people through Cor Unum in Lawrence, MA. Use this jar at home, school or work to collect, as soon as possible, as much money as you can."

In Lawrence, 75 percent of school-age children qualify for government-subsidized food programs. He said three out of four children here are at risk for hunger.

Those statistics prompted O'Brien to create the plan to build the meal center in South Lawrence and call it Cor Unum, a Latin word meaning "One Heart." It will be located on the premises of St. Patrick Church in a 5,000-square-foot, one-story building in a parking lot on the corner of Carver and Salem streets.

T-shirts are being sold at [www.labelsareforjars.org](http://www.labelsareforjars.org), in some retail stores, at the church and through direct sales made by groups of high school and college students. The goal is to raise \$1.4 million.

The mission recently received a donation of \$25,000 from Bank of America.

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