

By Caroline Hooten

2/25/22

Bob Batlan and his wife arrived at the church parking lot to hop on a truck and serve the homeless for the first time. He knew he would meet “certain poor people” and be going to a halfway house for those recently released from prison.

He looked at the young women that were going to accompany him on the truck run and thought: “I’m going to have to be protecting them.”

But, Batlan’s first trip “was a wonderful experience. The people were so grateful,” he said.

The short trip took him on a journey that he’s been on for the last two decades.

Batlan’s journey was halted for a few months when the pandemic shut down the operations of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, which is a non-profit organization in Austin that delivers food, clothes, toiletries and other necessities to the homeless by truck, according to the organization.

Batlan’s wife, Mary Lou Batlan, saw the negative impact the pandemic had on the homeless population.

“Interaction is important to these people. They haven’t had anybody listen to their story,” Mary Lou Batlan said.

Now, Batlan and the other volunteers are happy to be back serving the community on truck runs.

Over 10,000 people are experiencing homelessness in Austin, according to the City of Austin. Mobile Loaves and Fishes has about 10,000 volunteers annually who go on truck runs to serve these people, said Alan Graham, the founder and CEO.

Batlan has been a volunteer for almost 20 years. Batlan said he started volunteering after he retired in 1998 from his corporate strategy career at IBM, where he worked for 30 years. Their family, including their two daughters, often volunteered together at Mobile Loaves and Fishes, Mary Lou Batlan said.

“I don’t know if there have been any volunteers in the history of Mobile Loaves and Fishes that have been as committed as the Batlans,” Graham said.

Batlan said the relationships he builds with the homeless people he meets drives his passion for service.

“The people are really both in need and also very grateful,” Batlan said. “I think [Mary Lou and I] learned that the stereotypes around homelessness and poverty are largely not true.”

Through his friendships with the homeless, Graham found the main reason these people are on the streets is “all of them come from cataclysmically, profoundly broken family environments,” Graham said.

When these people experienced issues such as addiction, they did not have their family as their “safety net,” Graham said.

Graham said the goal of Mobile Loaves and Fishes is to “transform the paradigm as to how people view the stereotype of the homeless” through building relationships with these people on truck runs.

Batlan goes out on truck runs on the third and four Monday and the third Sunday of every month.

On Nov. 21, Batlan started with his typical routine of loading the truck with chips, neatly arranged by type, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and hot dogs, his group’s signature for the past 15 years, Batlan said.

Batlan and the volunteers that join him are mostly members of Temple Beth Shalom, a Jewish temple. Their rabbi wanted them to serve food that looked kosher, and since hot dogs can be kosher, they decided to serve hot dogs, Batlan said.

Graham said he liked the idea of the Jewish community being involved.

Graham told Batlan, ““We’re a faith based, Christian-based organization, and it’s one way to show that we’re reaching out to the whole community,”” Batlan said.

After the truck was loaded, Batlan drove the volunteers to Sunken Gardens, where a large homeless population lives. Batlan honked the horn three times to let the people know they had arrived. The volunteers put the food items the people requested in plastic bags, while Batlan walked around Sunken Gardens to let more people know the truck had arrived.

As one man walked up, he said, “Hot dogs, oh boy!”

One man, named William, walked up to the truck in a purple tie-dye shirt, cargo shorts and brown boots with his small, brown dog, Nico, by his side. He smiled when he talked about how Batlan and his team have helped him.

“This place has saved my life many times this summer... We’re grateful that there are good people out in the world still,” said William.

The next stop was the Mary Lee Foundation apartments. Residents, some using wheelchairs, immediately came out of their apartments when they heard the three honks and greeted each other and the volunteers saying, “Good to see you!”

One man in an electric wheelchair nodded toward Batlan and said, “Me, Bob we’re like that,” as he crossed his two fingers.

“A nice part of the truck runs is that the volunteers and the people they are serving get to catch up with each other,” Mary Lou Batlan said.

The reason the volunteers and the homeless people built these friendships was “the people serving and the people being served were on the same side of the serving table,” Graham said.

Batlan said the pandemic affected the people they see on truck runs.

“Since the pandemic, there’s some people we don’t see. We worry about them. We don’t know what happened,” Batlan said. “Are they the people who got housed? That would be great. Are they not? Are they alive? We don’t know. It’s a little scary.”

Batlan said one of his homeless friends is a “slight Hispanic man,” named Benson, but he has not seen him since the pandemic.

“He would always come up to us and give us a hug, and we’re wondering where he is now. We haven’t seen him,” Batlan said.

The Austin camping ban, which was passed by voters on May 1 of this year, affected the usual crowd the volunteers see on truck runs, Mary Lou Batlan said.

“Some of our people have been relocated, whether they wanted to be or not,” Mary Lou Batlan said.

Some of the camps the trucks usually visit have relocated since the camping ban, Graham said.

“We’ll find those camps, no problem.” Graham said.

Despite the pandemic and the camping ban, Batlan finds people in need right where they are.

When he was driving to the Mary Lee Foundation apartments in the truck, he noticed a small man covered in tattoos with many blankets to shield himself from the cold outdoors on the side of the street. He honked three times and pulled over into a gas station to give him a bag of food.

“I just saw him,” Batlan said. “He looked like he needed it.”