



HOLIDAY GIVING

The new Christmas party hot spot: the soup kitchen

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CALGARY—

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Free-flowing alcohol, an extravagant dinner and a late-night dance party in a swanky downtown restaurant: that's how Hedkandi Salon's Christmas parties have unfolded for the past nine years.

But Calgary salon owner Jereme Bokitch often felt the money went to waste.

“You spend \$5,000, \$6,000, \$7,000 and you want to feel good about it,” Mr. Bokitch says. “I felt completely dissatisfied. ...

“We have a very young staff and we order big meals and everyone drinks too much, and that's it,” he adds.

So this year, he cancelled the party – at least in its previous form.

Instead of taking over a hot nightspot, Hedkandi took over a commercial kitchen for a volunteer party with Calgary non-profit Soup Sisters/Broth Brothers. The salon's 40 employees were split into teams, given recipes and put to work dicing, grating and stirring to make 700 servings of soup for Calgarians in need. When the work was done, they sat down together to enjoy a bowl of soup, a salad and a glass of wine.

“It became more of a team-building event,” Mr. Bokitch says. “They loved it. They thought it was the best Christmas party ever.”

After a tough economic year, many businesses are passing on luxe Christmas parties in favour of giving back.

Soup Sisters, which runs soup-making parties year-round, added extra dates to accommodate five groups that are making soup for charity in lieu of typical holiday parties – and the organization has already taken a booking for next Christmas.

At the Salvation Army in Vancouver, not only has staff seen executives opting out of traditional Christmas parties in favour of volunteering, but they have also witnessed a broad change in the way businesses support charities. “There's a trend toward sweat-equity projects as opposed to just writing a cheque,” says Brian Venables, a Salvation Army spokesman.

That trend means it has been overwhelmed with companies looking to volunteer this holiday season. “The

Downtown Eastside location is chock full of volunteers from companies wanting to do something,” Mr. Venables says. “There's definitely been an increase – so much so that we just don't have any openings, so we send them to other locations.”

At the Mustard Seed Street Ministry in Calgary, group volunteer co-ordinator Paula Bannerman has seen a jump in interest from companies replacing Christmas parties with volunteering this holiday season. In recent weeks, she has received 50 to 60 calls a day from groups, mostly businesses, wanting to make meals for the homeless this Christmas.

Firms that volunteer at the Mustard Seed usually cover the cost of food, easing the financial strain on the organization.

“People are feeling like Christmas is so commercialized,” Ms. Bannerman says. “Everyone has everything they need and rather than give them just another \$50 gift card, it's nicer to do something as a team.”

The Cana Group of Cos., a Calgary-based construction and land development firm, decided to forgo its annual client Christmas party this year, instead diverting the funds to provide Christmas dinner for more than 1,000 homeless men and women at the Mustard Seed.

“In today's world, we feel this is a better alternative to our annual reception and the gifting of many non-needy items to those of us who already have so much,” Cana president John Simpson told his staff.

Indeed, the season of giving brings out so much philanthropic goodwill that holiday volunteer opportunities at the Mustard Seed were booked by the beginning of November.

Come the New Year, however, people aren't feeling so giving.

“It dries out in January,” Ms. Bannerman says. “So many people think they can just volunteer at Christmas time and they have no idea that we need volunteers all year long.”

Still, volunteering at a homeless shelter even once can help break down barriers, she says.

“They are very nervous about coming down and once they get there and they have fun and they get to meet our guests, they feel more comfortable and then they want to come back,” she says.

Sharon Hapton, founder of Soup Sisters/Broth Brothers, says it's already booked solid into 2011 after launching in March. But the idea of volunteering, she says, is especially resonant during the holidays.

“Everyone wants to feel like they're doing something, aside from being a glutton,” she says.

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