

Sheltered to chef

Eric Flath reflects on his time with The Salvation Army in Salem, Ore.

Chef Eric Flath plays a key role in helping people seek to establish healthy habits in Salem, Ore.

“Nutrition is a huge part of making real changes,” he said.



Flath coordinates food and beverage operations for the Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center and the recently reopened Lighthouse Shelter. Last summer he implemented the “Fresh Start” garden, where shelter residents grow, tend and harvest food that he incorporates into their meals.

He is passionate about working for The Salvation Army, the organization he credits with changing his life.

ChefEric02“I grew up in poverty,” he said, “surrounded by addiction and mental illness.” Following in his parents’ footsteps, he struggled with addiction, lost his home and faced homelessness.

In 2009, determined that he wouldn’t have his children living out of a car, Flath called shelters up and down Interstate 5 from Vancouver, Wash., to Eugene, Ore., seeking a place for his family. Only one facility would accept them: The Salvation Army’s Lighthouse Shelter.

Flath said that the kindness and generosity of the Army and its willingness to give him a chance enabled him to develop the self-confidence to make a breakthrough.

“They loved me until I loved myself,” he said.

The family stayed at the shelter five months. During this time Flath honed the cooking skills he began acquiring at age 16 when he worked at a family-style restaurant. He worked in food service off and on since then.

When the time came for them to find their own apartment, the family received a letter of recommendation from their counselor and the support of management and staff, which helped them secure a place to live.

“The staff was always supportive of us throughout our entire stay and would go out of their way to keep any momentum toward self sufficiency moving in a forward direction,” Flath said. “Although it

was difficult for my family to be in the situation we were in, the loving arms of The Salvation Army made our stay at the lodge as pleasant as the situation could allow and for that we are all eternally grateful.”

The Lighthouse Shelter reopened in January with repairs to its 50-year-old building including updated bathrooms, replaced floors and new paint, and welcomed 31 residents. Life and job skills classes, professional counseling, a Christian-based recovery group and case management are part of the structured treatment that residents receive during their stay.

“The physical remodel creates an environment allowing residents to feel appreciated, loved and welcomed to our Lighthouse Shelter,” said Melissa Bauer, social services director for The Salvation Army in Salem. “In addition to accommodating more residents, without the worries of repairs staff are able to support the residents on their path to self sufficiency.”

The Lighthouse Shelter will be able to operate at its full capacity of 83 when it has funding to purchase beds and other supplies.