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# Victoria

## Docklands bares its heart to the city's needy

Jill Stark

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THEY say it has no heart. That it lacks a sense of community. But yesterday, with the morning sun casting a shimmer on the still water, Docklands showed its soul.

Christmas carols rang out from Mecca Bah restaurant, providing a gentle siren song for 150 of Melbourne's most marginalised residents.

Some arrived on foot, some in minibuses driven by Robert Doyle, the city's lord mayor, others pushed walking frames, helped by Salvation Army volunteers.

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At this award-winning restaurant the food was always going to be good. But for many it was more than that.

"My Christmas would be very bleak without the Salvation Army and places like this that put on a lovely meal," Cheryl Cahill, a 59-year-old recovering addict told *The Sunday Age*. "I'd be spending the day on my own if I wasn't here".

Brendan Nottle, the Salvation Army's commanding officer in the City of Melbourne, said many of those tucking into the mixed carvery platter and roast vegies were homeless and battling mental health problems and drug and alcohol addiction, borne out of disadvantage and, for many, a history of abuse.

"If it wasn't for people like the Mecca Bah doing something like this then most of these people would be completely isolated and it would end up becoming one of the saddest days of the year, but instead it becomes one of the highlights, which is fantastic," Major Nottle said.

"All through December they get really stressed because they're reminded over and over of what they don't have. They look at the media and the shops and they see all the focus on family and getting together with friends and they stop and think, 'I don't have access to any of that.'

"But then they come to something like this where people from the broader community give up their day to put on a special event and it means so much to them."

The lord mayor, dressed casually in shorts and T-shirt for his role as bus driver, was delivered a lesson in humility by one diner who remarked, "I know you! You work for the council."

It was a busy morning for the lord mayor, who made four trips to pick up people from the Salvos' Bourke Street headquarters.

After brunch at Docklands he ferried people to a lunch at the Westpac Centre, laid on by the Collingwood Football Club.

With dinner also provided at a free event in the city in the evening it was the opportunity for people to have three square meals in one day, a rare occasion for some, Cr Doyle said.

"It actually shows people who have had some tough luck or very hard lives that people care about them - and people in Melbourne really do."

Restaurant manager Carlos Escudero said the staff - who gave up their own Christmas Day festivities to make the event happen for the sixth year in a row - found the experience rewarding.

"There's a lot of people out there who are having a tough time of it and we thought that during the Christmas period it would be good to give something back to the community.

" It's a long day for us but it comes from the heart and it brings us great joy."

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