

[The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

Breaking News National

Strangers enjoy Xmas feast together

Melissa Jenkins

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AAP

Cheryl Cahill feels blessed to have joined about 350 strangers to tuck into a traditional hot lunch in Melbourne on Christmas Day.

The 61-year-old, who says she used to live on the streets and use drugs, now has a flat in North Melbourne and has been coming to Christmas lunch with the Salvation Army for about the past five years.

"I've had the best Christmas Day you can imagine darling - all the food and all the people that are less fortunate than ourselves," she told AAP on Saturday.

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"If I hadn't have been here today I would have been home in my flat, totally depressed.

"I would have been all alone today - just so miserable and down in the dumps.

"I don't know how to explain how I feel. I just feel so privileged and so blessed."

The Salvation Army's Major Brendan Nottle said the homeless, refugees and the elderly were among those who enjoyed the lunch hosted by Collingwood Football Club.

About 150 people gathered for a charity Christmas brunch at Mecca Bah restaurant at the Docklands and a further 150 were expected to enjoy supper at the Spencer Street shopping complex.

Major Nottle said there had been a surge in requests for support this festive season from people who have had no previous contact with the Salvation Army.

"This year we have seen a big increase in the number of people coming in that wouldn't normally approach services such as ours," Major Nottle told AAP.

"They are saying the increase in interest rates has put significant pressure on their finances and they are struggling to make ends meet."

Across town in South Melbourne, upmarket cafe St Ali owners Salvatore Malatesta and his wife Lisette opened their doors and put on Christmas lunch for people less fortunate than themselves.

After deciding to hold a function for staff and customers who had nowhere else to go on Saturday they decided to take the idea a step further and welcome a wide range of people.

Guests and volunteers enjoyed a roast, seafood plus Christmas cake and custard for dessert.

"You've got people from all walks of life toasting with beautiful glasses," Ms Malatesta said.

"Can you hear the clinking of glasses? It's just lovely.

"I've got three young children and it's just delightful. They would not have met people like this in their lives if not for today."

Gabrielle Meehan, 50, who has lived in Melbourne for 12 years, said she met some wonderful people at the St Ali lunch.

She decided to attend with a friend because her family are in Queensland.

"Everybody is so friendly and everyone is having such a ball," Ms Meehan said.

"It's the best one I've had in Melbourne for sure."

Meanwhile, Santa delighted patients and their families at the Royal Children's Hospital Christmas morning.

Escorted by around seven fire trucks, Santa arrived at the back of the hospital and then gave every child a gift.

About 30 Metropolitan Fire Brigade firefighters helped Santa, while the MFB band spread the cheer with carols.

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