

Along with food, some job tips

Agency worker links food bank clients with groups offering job, education aid

By **SHERRI BORDEN COLLEY**
Staff Reporter

DARTMOUTH — Four mornings a week, a casually dressed Kevin Little stands in line at an area food bank chatting with clients who are down on their luck — many of them are poor, mentally ill and living in isolation.

They're there to get food but Little is not.

Since August 2008, Little has worked as a part-time employee of the Public Good Society, a Dartmouth-based non-profit agency. Through a program called Connections that WORK, he connects food bank clients to other agencies that can help them overcome barriers to employment and access to educational programs.

"I had a client who told me that she liked opera and theatre but she just couldn't afford to go to Neptune (Theatre) and all these places," Little said. "I heard about a program called the Halifax Humanities 101 and it's a marvellous opportunity to give people university-type of course work to populations that otherwise couldn't afford that kind of experience. And so I referred her to them and she's going to

graduate in June... and I'm going to be there."

Halifax Humanities 101 is a five-year-old program that offers the writings of literary and philosophical masters, such as Descartes, Homer, Ralph Waldo Emerson and T.S. Eliot, to people living on low incomes. Local university professors volunteer their time to teach and students get their books for free.

Because Little meets people on their own turf, the society has no physical location that the project calls home. His office consists of a cellphone, a knapsack to carry various agency brochures and a Tim Hortons card that enable clients to share conversations with Little over a cup of coffee.

"I always line up with the clients outside. I don't go inside with the volunteers because I don't want to set up any kind of power imbalance," Little said. "I stand in the lineup, I get to know the clients on a personal basis... then I go inside, usually have a coffee.

"I always tell them upfront, my name is Kevin, I work for the Public Good Society and I'm here to help you find anything you're looking for."

The society's board of directors is made up of representatives from a wide

variety of backgrounds in Dartmouth who have a passion for helping their neighbours.

Most of Little's clients are between 40 and 60 years old. Of a caseload of 195 people, Little has helped 29 get jobs through various employment centres, in turn decreasing their need for social assistance and food banks.

"Once you help a client that word gets out into the community," Little said. "So, often I get phone calls... from people who I have not met at a food bank but they are friends with somebody I've helped."

Each Monday morning, he phones as many clients as he can just to see how they are doing.

"Some of those people say basically, 'It's nice to hear from you but you don't need to call me very often.' In other words, 'It's nice to hear from you but maybe every couple of months.' Other clients are delighted because they don't get a lot of contact — they're quite isolated and they love to hear from me every week."

The society receives funding from the Canada-Nova Scotia Skills & Learning Framework and the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services.

More information about the Public Good Society can be found at www.publicgoodsociety.ca.

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