

# 'Tis the season for giving and gathering

written by CARL DANBURY, JR.



For some, the most treasured gift during this holiday season will come without a beautifully wrapped package and lovely bow. It may not be given by, or in the presence of, family and friends, but rather passed along as a blessing from God by two men who were once rewarded with a second chance. The gift is simply an opportunity, where the homeless, or those addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, are taught a trade, as well as fundamental elements to become a person of integrity.

## STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Chefs Alex Reethof and Lake Dawson have dedicated their vocational lives to giving a hand to men currently at the Atlanta Mission, or those who had been there for a period of time. Reethof and Dawson started the project, Gathering Industries, in 2013 after their own lives had taken an unlikely turn. Reethof suffered a massive heart attack, one that he says he should not have survived, while Dawson suffered through a lengthy period of addiction, misfortune and the death of his grandfather, his mentor, which pushed him close to the edge of destruction. Both Reethof and Lake were professionally trained chefs prior to their setbacks and separately devoted their lives to Christ before meeting while working on a food service program for Ignatius House, a Jesuit retreat center in Sandy Springs.

"We incubated the Gathering Industries program there, and discussed how we could unveil this project on a larger scale," Reethof said. "Both Lake and I were granted



a second chance in life, and we are now dedicated to helping others that need one too."

While some solely feed the homeless, Gathering Industries instructs their constituency on how to feed others by training them for restaurant or food service occupations.

"These guys have [become] clean or sober, and now are focused on turning their lives around and examining their possibilities. Those possibilities come

through a job. They recognize that a job is very important. They just need somebody willing to spend time with them to teach them what it takes. Most of the chefs I know want someone with experience, but how does someone get that experience?" Reethof asked rhetorically.

"We are trying to fill their toolboxes with the tools or skills to move forward, to go out on their own and be able to do something of value. We have already helped place two guys and they are doing fabulously. I get calls every week from restaurants and food service people looking for help. The hospitality community is embracing what we are doing," he said.

## TRIAL AND ERROR

The Gathering Industries program begins with a 16-hour course, The Integrity Project, which often is used by some courts as alternative sentencing for misdemeanor cases. The goal is to teach personal core values that will result in a virtuous lifestyle.

"The basic tenets of the project are respect, reliability and responsibility," Reethof advised. "They must understand thoroughly what they are. These guys have never been shown, taught or had examples of these in their lives. We don't move forward until they complete the course and



everyone is talking the same language." The course is taught by Omar Howard, a reformed felon, and current CEO/founder of Freedom Is A Choice, Inc., a Stone Mountain-based mentoring program for at-risk youth and troubled adults.

"Staying on the right side of the legal line isn't always second nature to some. We want our guys to know that if you make a good decision you have freedom, but if you make a bad choice you lose your freedom," Reethof stated.

After completing The Integrity Project, Reethof provides detailed and often painstaking step-by-step instruction on

all aspects of the business, including: culinary fundamentals, all types of cooking methods, breakfast, lunch and dinner item preparation with speed and efficiency, pasta making, desserts and confections, labor scheduling, food storage, front-of-the-house operations, ordering, receiving, inventory, troubleshooting food and labor cost issues, simple accounting and profit and loss statements. Successful completion of the entire course means the individual is ready to seek employment with an eye fixed upon self-sufficiency.

"It's highly developmental in scope," Reethof said. "We are making major



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headway, but frankly it's a bit slower than I anticipated. These guys are getting it, but they just have never been taught, nor have they ever been involved [to this degree]. It's highly rewarding, but very, very strenuous."

Customer feedback for the meals that the culinary team has prepared is extraordinary. In addition, the group can handle corporate events for as many as 200 people.

"The feedback we are getting is phenomenal. One Buckhead-based company we deal with won't use anyone else now. They call us every week to order lunches for 200 people," Reethof remarked.

Reethof insists upon using the finest ingredients he can source. The breads they use are from Alon's Bakery, and they opt to make their own mayonnaise from scratch. Though the preparation is more arduous, the results are proven.

"We prepare a healthier, lighter style of lunch with fewer calories in most instances. It is as wholesome as possible and our clients really like that aspect of what we are doing. We are building steam and momentum with the project," Reethof said.

### A TASTE OF SUCCESS

The impetus to begin this program came from personal setbacks for both Reethof and Dawson, and the men they serve likely have endured their share as well.

"These are just regular fellas. They just need a hand up. They don't want a handout; they have had those before," Reethof said. "We [recently] completed a project serving 200 people each meal during a three-day period, and they paraded us up to tell everyone who we are and what we are doing. Our guys aren't comfortable with that — they don't want to be individually viewed as a poster child; they want to get their lives moving in a positive direction."

"Providing them with hope, dignity and opportunity, to help them make the most of a second chance, to get back on their feet and to take on responsibility for themselves is exciting," Reethof said. "They are embracing this faith-based environment and the Christ-centered activities that we are doing. The goal for them is to take care of others, the same way they have been. It is so humbling to see these guys really embrace the opportunity."

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