

Years 7 & 8
3rd Place: Kyra Bredenhof
Year 7, John Calvin Christian College

Open Hearts

The afternoon sun glinted on the sign at the front of the building. Birds chirped as a short old lady unlocked the door and let herself inside. The sign on the front of the door read 'Open Hearts Soup Kitchen. All Welcome.' The lady straightened the sign and smiled. Another evening at the soup kitchen was about to begin.

"It's Taco Tuesday today!" 5-year-old Clementine shrieked as she walked to the soup kitchen, her mother and sister following behind her. Deirdre smiled as she cradled her youngest, Anya, but she felt a familiar ache in her heart. Thinking of her husband, who left them 2 years ago, she opened the door of the soup kitchen and ushered her girls inside.

'If only John was – no. I can't think about him. He's gone,' Deirdre thought, swallowing the lump in her throat.

Brennan shuffled through the door of the bright, cheery soup kitchen, bottle in hand. He plopped down on a chair and pulled a worn photo from his back pocket. Gazing at the woman in the photo, he felt his heart break again for the sister he had lost. Cancer had taken his amazing sister, and with it, Brennan's happiness. He chugged down what was left in his bottle, trying to ease the pain. But it never worked.

Graham scrubbed a dirty plate with his brush, immersing it in sudsy water. Hearing a mother and her children outside, he felt a deep emptiness in his heart, because he had never received love like that. Meesha, the owner of Open Hearts, walked into the kitchen and silently started to dry the dishes. Graham looked down at the old woman and smiled through his tears.

"Boys, why don't you head to the serving table and get some grub?" Axel said, patting his sons on the back. Bernard stepped forward and took hold of his brother's wheelchair.

"I can push myself," Bryan said firmly, wheeling himself to the serving table and ignoring the stares from the others. Bernard followed behind him.

"Man, how can you be so brave?" he said, "Everyone always looks at you funny. Aren't you just so sick of it?"

Bryan shrugged and smiled as he headed to the serving table.

Donovan sat by himself at a table, morosely eating his taco. Sighing, he picked up a newspaper. The headline read, 'Is Racism Still Part of Our Lives in America?' 'Yes, and don't I know it!' scowled Donovan in his head, crumpling up the newspaper and tossing it on the ground. A little girl grinned at him, but his glare sent her quickly away.

Cara handed a plate to a boy in a wheelchair. Cara smiled back as he wheeled over to Meesha. School was finished for the day, so Cara had come to volunteer at the soup kitchen, and to get some extra marks for her 'Helping in the Community' assignment. Suddenly, Cara saw Ashlyn and Cara's other 'followers' walking past the soup kitchen.

"Yikes, I can't let them see me!" she gasped, turning her head away.

Kallie and Pablo sat at a table in the soup kitchen, munching on tacos. Kallie glanced around the soup kitchen, recognising a popular girl from her class and a boy from her art lesson. 'At least the soup kitchen is free, since money's scarce at home.' Kallie thought, stroking her younger brother's hair. She had heard rumours about a swimming pool taking the place of Open Hearts Soup Kitchen. Kallie felt a knot in her stomach as she mulled over that possibility.

Brennan pushed aside his plate of tacos and took another glug from his bottle. He stared at a young boy, scooting himself around the room on a wheelchair. For a few minutes he watched the boy laughing every time he crashed into a table or a wall. Brennan felt the corners of his mouth tug as he watched the boy's strong determination.

"I saw a sad man reading the paper, so I smiled big at him!" Clementine burred to her mother excitedly. Anya giggled along with her big sister. Deirdre smiled absentmindedly at her daughters and wiped a lonely tear from her eyes.

Graham watched Meesha serving the young children, smiling and laughing as she scooped tacos on their plates. Meesha was *in loco parentis* for him, always speaking kind words to him and encouraging him. Where would he be without Meesha?

Bryan wheeled around the room as fast as he could. It was a game he always played; to see how fast he could go without bumping into anything. Meesha didn't mind him zooming around. Bryan noticed a dishevelled man looking at him. Then Bryan looked down on the ground and saw a crumpled newspaper. In black print was written 'Swimming Pool to Replace Open Hearts Soup Kitchen?' Bryan gasped and went to show it to his dad.

Cara looked around the soup kitchen. She had heard that a swimming pool might be built here instead of Open Hearts, but she wasn't sure if anyone else here knew. She recognised a girl from her class, but not one of her 'followers', the girls that wanted to impress her and be her friend. They were all cool, but she'd never really had a bestie. 'Hopefully the rumour isn't true,' Cara thought.

Kallie walked over to the boy from her art class. He was with his paralysed brother, and his dad.

"Hi!" Kallie said, "What's in the newspaper?" Bryan showed her the paper and Kallie gasped. "I thought I heard something about it closing," Kallie said, "What'll we do without this place?"

"I don't know," sighed Bernard, "Let's show it to Meesha." They brought the newspaper to her.

"Oh no!" Meesha frowned, "I got a letter from the government about it too! What's going to happen now?"

Donovan pushed back his chair and got up. The little girl ran up to him again. "Hello!" she said eagerly. Donovan grunted in reply as he grabbed his wallet and coat. The little girl hugged his legs and grinned before running off. Donovan watched as she talked to her mother again, then he headed out the door to go back to his apartment, the place full of memories of his wife.

Meesha sat at a table, worrying about the soup kitchen. Was Open Hearts really going to close? She couldn't let the place that had been her pride and joy for 10 years shut down! *I have to think of a plan*, Meesha thought.

The next night, as all the visitors at Open Hearts slurped their soup, Meesha stood and cleared her throat, motioning for them all to be quiet.

"Friends, the soup kitchen is being threatened to close down and be replaced by a swimming pool. We need to have a plan. Does anyone have any ideas?" Meesha said. Gasps and murmurs ricocheted around the room. After a moment, Brennan stood.

"Urn, I used to work for the government, and I think it's a possibility for us to make a petition against this," he said softly. Meesha nodded as Kallie rose to her feet.

"We could also have a protest with signs and stuff," Kallie said. Meesha nodded again, and the others agreed as well. It was decided.

"All right," Meesha announced, "Let's get going. Graham, can you get 2000 signatures on the petition within 30 days? Deirdre, do your girls want to help with that?"

After Meesha handed out the jobs, they all got to work. So, over the next few evenings, the "team" worked hard on the petition and the protest.

Kallie leaned over a blank poster, frowning. How would she make the posters look? A soft voice made her suddenly look up.

"Hey Kallie," Cara, a popular girl from her class said, "How's your poster going?" Cara had never been that nice to Kallie, so she expected a trick.

"Fine," she answered.

"Urm, I just wanted to say, that I'm sorry for, you know, not always being super nice to you," Cara murmured uncertainly. "You're pretty cool!"

Kallie nodded and smiled.

Donovan scowled grumpily at the table. Next to him a young server and a boy in a wheelchair were writing a speech. He was supposed to figure out where the petition would take place, along with a young lady named Deirdre. Why was the place going to close anyways?

"Urn, I guess we could do it near my apartment," Donovan grunted at last. Deirdre smiled politely as she wrote it down.

Brennan shuffled around the soup kitchen, looking for Meesha so he could ask her a question about the petition. They had one more week till Open Hearts was supposed to close. Graham and the two little girls that had gone with him had gotten 400 signatures already from the townspeople. Brennan was impressed. He turned into the corridor that led to the kitchen and found Wheelchair Boy crying.

"Hey, what's up?" Brennan asked. For once, his voice wasn't slurred from booze.

"Nothing; its fine," the boy replied, his head down. "It's just I really don't want this place to close. I love it so much! I'm Bryan by the way."

Brennan frowned and patted Bryan on the shoulder.

"You're really brave, buddy," Brennan said, "I wish I could pass each hurdle with a smile like you."

Bryan grinned at that.

"You just gotta stay happy!" he laughed behind his shoulder as he wheeled away.

Cara, Kallie and Pablo walked home from Open Hearts together that night, laughing and talking.

"Maybe our plan will work!" Kallie said hopefully.

"Maybe it will!" answered Cara. She didn't bother look around for Ashlyn and Co., she was happy with Kallie at her side.

"It's the day of the protest!" Meesha announced to the "team" at Open Hearts three days later. Graham smiled up at Meesha, clutching the 405 signatures. She had been so encouraging to them over the past few weeks, and now it was time! They had all arrived at noon to head to the protest, which would be by Donovan's apartment on Thomas Lane. Deirdre squeezed Anya and Clementine's hands tightly as Meesha led the group down the road to Thomas Lane. Cara and Kallie walked together.

"I'm nervous for my speech," Cara said anxiously.

"You'll be fine!" Kallie said, giving Cara a hug. Anya and Clementine ran ahead of their mother to follow Donovan.

"Hi girls," Donovan grunted. He had to smile as the girls giggled and played.

"You're the best guy ever!" Clementine exclaimed, hugging Donovan. Donovan surprised himself by hugging her back.

When they arrived at Thomas Lane, Kallie and Pablo handed out posters to the gathering crowd who heard about the protest from the paper. At 3:00, the protest

was going to start. Brennan had already given the petition to a member of the government who was dealing with it and deciding the outcome.

Cara and Bryan made their way to the front.

"Open Hearts Soup Kitchen is full of many visitors each day," Bryan began, "It's a place where new friends are made, and stories are told."

"It's a place where everyone works together; where smiles replace tears," Cara added. Kallie waved one of her signs proudly.

"It's a place where empty people are filled and where hearts are opened," they said in unison, "Keep Open Hearts to keep hearts open."

The crowd clapped and cheered as a member of the government made his way to the front.

"Thanks for that lovely speech," he said, "After a night of discussing and thinking, we have come to a decision. Open Hearts will . . . stay open."

At that, everyone erupted in cheers and shouts of joy. Deirdre grabbed Donovan's hands and sobbed with joy. Donovan laughed loud and hard as he squeezed Anya and Clementine in a big hug. Kallie and Cara jumped up and down and squealed. Brennan hugged Bryan, whose eyes were dripping with tears of joy. Meesha embraced Graham, laughing and grinning. They were all filled with joy. The soup kitchen really *had* opened hearts.