

Spreading Nelson Mandela's kindness

Every year on July 18, staff at the South African High Commission observe Nelson Mandela International Day by volunteering at an Ottawa charitable organization that supports the needy, vulnerable and weak.

The day, which is the freedom fighter's birthday, was adopted by the United Nations in December 2009 and has been celebrated every year since. When South African High Commissioner Sibongiseni Yvonne Dlamini-Mntambo came to Ottawa in May 2017, she established the tradition that staff who wanted to could volunteer.

"The belief is that each individual has the power to transform the world," Dlamini-Mntambo said. "You can make an impact. It is related to Nelson Mandela, recognizing his long history of dedication towards the struggle."

She said Mandela dedicated about 67 years of his life toward the struggle for freedom in South Africa and on this day, the idea is that South Africans spend 67 minutes — one minute for each year Mandela devoted — doing some good in their community. But, of course, the high commission staff go beyond that. One year, they spent two days volunteering — one at the Ottawa Food Bank and one at The Ottawa Mission, where they prepared and served sandwiches to about 200 people in need, and cleaned up afterwards. Last year, they returned to The Mission.

The members of the high commission personally bought the food and also



Staff from the South African High Commission help out at The Ottawa Mission. From left, South African High Commissioner Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo, social secretary Trudi Hogue, third secretary Nondlela Maponya, receptionist Lea Allen, accountant Julia Shin, administrative clerk Lunga Majombozi, The Ottawa Mission's executive director Peter Tilley and first secretary Fernando Slawers.

made a pooled donation of \$200 from their own pockets.

"It's a small contribution," Dlamini-Mntambo said. "It's nothing compared to what Nelson Mandela did, but we do it gladly."

Most of the high commission's 17 staff members volunteer and contribute. If July 18 falls on a weekday, they leave a skeleton staff to keep the office running; when it eventually falls on a weekend, they'll still show up in high numbers. In addition, some staff members have continued to volunteer at The Mission, so it's turned into a long-term collaboration.

Fernando Slawers, first secretary at the South African High Commission, said

they're considering adding a women's organization to their volunteer mandate as well. The diplomats would cook a South African meal for up to 70 women from Cornerstone Housing for Women.

For The Mission's part, they were extremely happy with the results of the high commission's volunteer project.

"It was wonderful," said Jake Harding, volunteer co-ordinator at The Ottawa Mission, and added that the relationship has continued. "A number of members from their group also came in and helped us with our volunteer appreciation event and served as volunteers at the Hope Charity Volleyball Tournament." ■



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