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It's been good year for charity bakery



Stanley LongBey, left, assistant baker, sort out cookies at Sweet Miss Givings. (Kuni Takahashi, Chicago Tribune / October 30, 2008)



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I met Stan Sloan a year ago in a row of old warehouses near Division Street and the [Chicago River](#), behind a little door marked "Sweet Miss Giving's."

On the back side of the door sat a bakery so new the stainless steel had hardly a scratch. The bakers were new, too, and they had three regular orders to fill, including the \$10 request from the Cheetah Gym.

This wasn't just any new bakery, though. The bakers, who were learning to chop carrots and do basic recipe math, were homeless. Most had [HIV](#). The bakery was job-training for them and fundraising for people like them.

At the time, I asked Sloan -- a perpetually tanned, dapper guy who's not what comes to mind when you hear "Reverend" -- if Sweet Miss Giving's wasn't just another do-gooding utopia destined to fail.

"Watch us grow," he said.

Tuesday afternoon, a year later.

The Reverend, with his usual crisp shirt and November tan, walks into the bakery. Several of the staff gather to explain what's changed in the last 12 months.

Five hundred cookies a day now, up from a single tray.

Two classes of bakers complete, a third just begun.

A [United Way](#) innovation award.

Standing orders from all over Chicago, including three [Whole Foods](#) markets, several universities and several theaters, among them Steppenwolf.

And there's [Bill Clinton](#).

He's coming to speak next week at the luncheon for Chicago House, the agency Sloan runs and that Sweet Miss Giving's was founded to support.

Despite the bakery's success, Chicago House still needs money for the varied services it provides to homeless people with HIV and [AIDS](#), and Sloan was tired of boozy, boring black-tie fundraisers. It's also hard in a recession to sell tickets to long, fussy, swanky dinners -- at least for this cause.

"We're not sexy," Sloan says. "People would rather not think about us. But I think if people are given something that's intellectual and exciting and hope-filled, they'll leave and think more about the issues and see the issues as connected to them."

He hopes Clinton will help the lunchers connect HIV in Chicago to HIV in Africa, and help them care. Tickets are selling faster than they ever have for a standard black-tie dinner. Corporate sponsorships, he says, have more than covered Clinton's speaking fee.

"Sheila," he calls to a woman in the bakery.

A middle-age woman walks over, smiles, extends a hand. Her name is Sheila Jones.

She'll be featured in the luncheon video, telling her life story, how she spent years living on the street, taking and selling drugs. On her way out of prison, she was handed an envelope. She opened it on the train ride home. It told her she had HIV. When she got off the train, she got high.

Jones eventually landed at Chicago House and got clean for real. She just finished six months in the bakery and starts work soon at the new Sweet Miss Giving's concession in the Ogilvie Transportation Center downtown.

I hope that one day some business school -- maybe the U. of C.'s, which has a regular Wednesday cookie order -- analyzes exactly what has made Sweet Miss Giving's work, despite the odds.

Sloan has one reason: "We want to give people something they want."

That means good cookies and, next Wednesday at the [Palmer House](#), Bill Clinton.

By the way, even if you can't stand Clinton, you'd like the pumpkin upside-down cake.

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