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## Nonprofit gives homeless red carpet treatment, room for the night at Omni Dallas Hotel



David Timothy, founder of the SoupMobile, gets a hug from Carol 'Mama' Hawkins, 58, after she received gifts and lunch at the Omni Dallas Hotel on Monday

Photo: David Woo/Staff

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Just as Carol Hawkins remembers the exact day she became homeless — Sept. 29, 2012 — the 58-year-old will remember Christmas Eve 2012 as a day she got a brief reprieve.

Her luxurious seventh-floor room and skyline view at Omni Dallas Hotel was a far cry from the mat she stays on each night in the Bridge homeless shelter's sleeping pavilion.

"I'm overwhelmed," Hawkins said. "We're blessed to be here, and I thank God."

Five hundred homeless men, women and children spent Christmas Eve at the hotel, enjoying a day of free pampering and a night in a warm bed.

The eighth annual Celebrate Jesus event was put on by SoupMobile, a nonprofit mobile soup kitchen.

After being delivered by charter bus, guests walked down a long red carpet as the band from Mesquite's John Horn High School played the theme song from *Rocky*. Snow machines filled the air with flurries.

Close to 2,500 volunteers worked to make the event run smoothly — from sorting donated clothes to bringing extra cream and sugar to rooms. They lined the red carpet, giving hugs and handshakes and wishing the guests a merry Christmas.

When they stepped into the lobby, guests were given backpacks filled with a new shirt and pants, matching their clothing size. After that, they made their way up to the rooms.

David “the SoupMan” Timothy is the executive director of the nonprofit charity that runs the event. He said the group's mission — to feed and provide shelter to the homeless — comes straight from Jesus.

“Two thousand years ago, there was no room at the inn for baby Jesus. But the SoupMobile, with the support of thousands of volunteers from the greater Dallas area, is making room at the inn,” he said. “When they wake up on Christmas morning, it's going to be in a warm, safe bed.”

Most guests were paired two to a room. Hawkins shared a room with Pamela Tucker, 49, who also stays at the Bridge.

Hawkins' nickname is “Mama,” she said, “because I'm always trying to talk to people and give them encouragement.” Tucker is one of her “babies.”

“You can't fathom the stressfulness of being homeless until you live under it,” Hawkins said.

Their plans for Christmas Eve? “I want to take a nice long hot shower,” Hawkins said. “I want to eat some nice food.”

Tucker, who has been homeless for two years, sipped hot coffee and tea, soaked in bubble bath and called her mother in Seagoville. “Oh man,” she said. “This is really, really wonderful.”

The event had been held since 2005 at Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion, but a major renovation project required this year's change of venue.

“We were pleased to step in and really provide a venue for the less fortunate people in the city,” said Larry Magor, managing director of the Omni Dallas Hotel. “It's a remarkable thing to be able to provide a warm bed and a place for people to stay.”

On their way to the lunchtime banquet, guests walked down another red carpet flanked by high-fiving volunteers. They enjoyed a three-course meal as they were serenaded by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra Brass Quintet.

Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings helped serve meals, carrying on the tradition of former Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert, who also attended.

“Today is a wonderful day that people are giving,” Rawlings said to the guests as they finished their steaks in the ballroom. He thanked Timothy, the Omni, the volunteers and the event sponsors. The biggest thanks went to the homeless, which he called “the most grateful friends that I've ever had.”

“That spirit of gratitude is something we need to learn about,” he said. “We are better, and our spirits are richer because of your being here today.”

After lunch, guests received donated gifts, such as teddy bears for the kids and handbags for the ladies. In the evening, *Home Alone* played on a big screen in the ballroom, and pizzas and drinks were delivered to each room before bed.

Before the buses return on Christmas morning, volunteers will distribute any remaining clothing donations.

Hawkins had just one thing on her wish list.

“If I could just get a coat, that's really all I want for Christmas.”