



## People *of the* Year

Outstanding service providers feeding those in need one plate at a time

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Akin



Lang



Koopmans



Fishbein



Cullen





## PEOPLE OF THE YEAR

# Five individuals devoted to caring for the less fortunate in community

TOM EADER

ST. CROIX — While there are numerous volunteers from non-profit organizations, churches, soup kitchens and government agencies that are instrumental in feeding the hungry and less fortunate on a daily basis throughout the territory, The Avis selected five individuals that stand out amongst the community service providers to feature as the 2011 People of the Year.

Michael Akin is executive director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, a nonprofit charitable organization that has been feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the needy for more than 46 years.



Akin

Catholic Charities operates soup kitchens/drop-in centers on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John, providing individuals with hot meals, showers, clothing and referral services. It also operates Bethlehem Shelters for the Homeless on St. Thomas and St. Croix, providing a safe and drug-free environment for men, women and children. It even provides employment and housing assistance along with financial literacy courses to move residents to independent living. The P.A.T.H. program in both island districts provides outreach services for homeless individuals suffering from substance abuse and/or mental illness.

"We serve anywhere between 35 and 55 people at the soup kitchen in Christiansted," Akin said. "A soup kitchen, while feeding is important, is also a place where people can get a shower and get some clean clothes."

Additionally, Akin said the soup kitchen also provides an opportunity for Catholic Charities to keep in contact with its clients and make referrals for any other services that they may need through the Department of Health or the Department of Human Services.

"So it's important in that respect too," Akin said of the soup kitchen.

And after realizing the clients Catholic Charities was seeing at its soup kitchen in Christiansted

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Michael Akin,  
executive director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands

were the same each day, Akin said the organization began a mobile street outreach program conducted by Florence John-Jules in order to reach others who were in need of a hot meal.

"She does fantastic work," he said. "Three days a week she'll take food, and clothing at times, out on the street to western Christiansted and out to mid-island."

Akin said the goal is to find a place for homeless individuals to live as well as provide them with necessary services so they can maintain their living situation. While a variety of outreach programs have helped to make it easier for homeless individuals to live, he said the next step is to find them permanent residences, indicating Catholic Charities received a Community Development Block Grant to develop housing in Christiansted for the homeless. He said the Department of Human Services received a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant to develop housing for the homeless in Christiansted as well. He said the territory is moving in that direction to build the housing, but with the current state of the economy and current demands on local funds, he said the construction might not happen this year.

"It's extremely rewarding work in many ways, and it's extremely challenging, but there's always the sense that there's a lot more to be done and a lot of that is simply, sharply reducing the amount of homeless, and that goes back to finding permanent, supportive housing for those people," Akin said. "It's rewarding, it's challenging and there's just always more that can be done."

Additional information about Catholic Charities is available online at [www.catholiccharitiesusvi.org](http://www.catholiccharitiesusvi.org), or by calling 777-8518. Individuals can make donations to the nonprofit organization on the Web site, or by sending a check to Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, P.O. Box 10736, St. Thomas, VI, 00801.

Debbie Cullen is the director of the Christiansted Lighthouse Mis-

sion, a nonprofit organization established in 2002 that provides various services to the needy and homeless in addition to offering an after-school program for children. Debbie Cullen and the Lighthouse Mission help to make sure their underprivileged clients don't have to start their day on an empty stomach as the faith-based community service organization serves breakfast at 8 a.m. every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

Debbie Cullen operates the Lighthouse Mission with her husband, Ed Cullen, pastor at Southgate Baptist Church. The Lighthouse Mission building, located on the corner of Company and Market Streets in historic Sunday Market Square, was actually donated to Southgate Baptist Church in the late 1990s. Although Ed Cullen is currently the pastor of the church, Larry Meade was the pastor at the time of the donation. Joe and Sharon Rappa donated the building to the church. The Lighthouse Mission is an extension ministry of Southgate Baptist Church.

"I think it's identity emerged as we began functioning in the community," Debbie Cullen said about the Lighthouse Mission.

After the church gained the building and the Lighthouse Mission found a home, Debbie Cullen said one of the first services the ministry offered was to provide food to the needy by distributing sandwiches out of good will, love and concern for the community.

"As the support developed and our capacity expanded, we were able to expand our outreach opportunities," she said.

The Lighthouse Mission is committed to enriching the lives of individuals within the community by serving, encouraging, teaching and challenging children and adults alike to find meaning and purpose in life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.



Cullen

The ministry's mission is to shine the light of Jesus into Christiansted through Christ-centered programs of education and compassion.

Additional information about the Lighthouse Mission is available online at [www.lighthousestx.org](http://www.lighthousestx.org), or by calling 773-3551. Individuals can make donations to the nonprofit organization on the Web site, or by sending a check to Lighthouse Mission, P.O. Box 24248, Christiansted, VI, 00824-00248.

Howard Fishbein, better known as "Brother Howard," is the founding director of Project H.E.L.P. (Homeless Emergency Living Program Inc.), a nonprofit organization which not only helps to feed the hungry and homeless, but also advocates on behalf of disabled individuals, whether it be for medical treatment or to improve living conditions. Considering Project H.E.L.P. has a two-pronged agenda, the acronym also stand for Handicapped Emergency Living Program.



Fishbein

"It gives me something rewarding to do every day when I wake up in the morning and a blessing when I close my eyes at night," Fishbein said.

Back in 1989, after temporarily leaving the island in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, Fishbein said he was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Florida.

"After being away after Hugo for one year, when I came back here in my new conscious of faith I wanted to do something in the Lord's work," Fishbein said.

Fishbein said he was motivated to start feeding the homeless after participating in a Sunday feeding Bible study at his church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Estate Peter's Rest. After driving through Sunday Market Square

on his way to church one day and observing what he said Jesus Christ referred to as the "least of brethren," he said he became motivated to start feeding the homeless at noon at the Christian "Shan" Hendricks Vegetable Market on Sundays when the soup kitchens are closed.

"It reassures my purpose in life not to just watch the sun, but I can continue to be actively doing something for neighbors," Fishbein said.

After Fishbein started his Sunday feeding routine, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Peter's Rest and the Christiansted Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as St. Croix Mission Outreach got on board to help divide the responsibility.

Now, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Peter's Rest provides the food on the first Sunday of each month, Project H.E.L.P. takes on the task on the second Sunday, the Christiansted Seventh-day Adventist Church takes on the responsibility on the third Sunday and St. Croix Mission Outreach, assisted by members of the Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church, serves the less fortunate on the fourth Sunday. On those rare occasions when there is a fifth Sunday in the month, the groups work together.

Additional information about Project H.E.L.P. is available by calling Fishbein at 773-8190. Individuals can make donations to the nonprofit organization by sending a check to Project H.E.L.P., P.O. Box 4202, Christiansted, VI, 00822.

Rod Koopmans, pastor of St. Croix Reformed Church, is executive director of My Brothers' Table, a soup kitchen located on Queen Cross Street in Frederiksted. The soup kitchen, which has been operating since 1991, serves hot meals beginning at noon Monday through Friday, serving more than 15,000 meals annually.



**Koopmans**

Koopmans said the proposal of establishing My Brothers' Table came about in the wake of Hurricane Hugo in 1989 out of con-

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## PEOPLE OF THE YEAR

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cern for the needy after the devastating storm. The soup kitchen was actually started by Janet Hancock.

When Koopmans came to the island in 1997, he said he was asked to become involved in an organization outside of the St. Croix Reformed Church in addition to his church activities. He said he had been part of a church in New York that had a food pantry, so when he found out about My Brothers' Table he started volunteering there. When Hancock left the soup kitchen, Koopmans became executive director in 1999.

"It's something that needs to be done; people are hungry and it's a problem that's easy to solve," Koopmans said, indicating hunger is solved by providing food, which is much easier than treating physical or mental health ailments. "If people are hungry, give them food."

In order to feed the hungry, Koopmans said he receives a lot of support from the community as well as from his chefs, Rose Carty and Hyacinth George. And each day the soup kitchen opens its doors to serve the public. Koopmans said he receives more than he gives when he sees the smiles on the faces of his clients and they thank him. Although his clients thank him, he said they should thank the people in the whole procedure like the chefs as well as the individuals who donate to the food drives.

Looking into the future, Koopmans said My Brothers' Table



Florence John-Jules, coordinator of the P.A.T.H outreach program for the Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands Soup Kitchen, serves food to a client in this Nov. 12, 2010 file photo.

will be receiving two parcels of property in Frederiksted near its present location.

"It looks like through the generosity of the Morehouse Trust we're going to be expanding," he said, indicating his board of directors will have a discussion to determine what needs its clients have in order to address those needs with its expanded facilities.

Whether it's a donation of land, food or volunteers who serve food,

My Brothers' Table continues to operate on a daily basis thanks to all of its supporters.

"We're always in need of continued support from the community and hopefully the Legislature, and we appreciate all their efforts," Koopmans said.

Additional information about My Brothers' Table is available online at [www.mybrotherstablevi.org](http://www.mybrotherstablevi.org), or by calling 778-0520. Individuals can make donations to the nonprofit orga-

nization on the Web site, or by sending a check to My Brothers' Table, P.O. Box 3194, Frederiksted, VI, 00841.

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