

# Sailor serves up breakfast to celebrate birthday

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HMCS *Calgary* Master Sailor (MS) Rommel Billanes loves volunteering because it nurtures his compassion for others while enriching their lives.

On March 23, he lived up to that mantra by hopping behind the grill and serving a complimentary nutritious breakfast to approximately 200 beneficiaries at Victor's Our Place Society Community Centre.

The day also happened to fall on MS Billanes' 55th birthday, but instead of accepting presents and cards that morning, the Marine Technician was busy giving back to his community. He also paid for the meals out of his pocket while his wife Carolinda, daughter Sophia and shipmate Sailor 1st Class (S1) Bindiya Raman helped in the kitchen. It was a birthday present he will never forget, says MS Billanes.

"Our efforts were all worth it because the residents were overjoyed and thrilled with the food," he said. "Some came back for seconds while others took time to express their gratitude to us for sponsoring the breakfast."

A non-profit, Our Place Society operates multiple facilities in the provincial capital, catering to the needs of its most vulnerable populations, including those facing homelessness, mental health difficulties, substance abuse disorders, low-income earners and elderly individuals living in poverty.

The meal MS Billanes and his party

served consisted of scrambled eggs, sausages, hash browns, croissants, jam, peanut butter, fresh fruit and their choice of juice, coffee or tea. It's a step up from the hot oatmeal and coffee typically available at Our Place for breakfast, says MS Billanes.

Dawn Barr, Our Place Society Manager of Volunteer Services, says MS Billanes began working in the clothing distribution area of Our Place two years ago and immediately revealed that he would have an impact role in his work. Barr delights at MS Billanes's most recent efforts in serving breakfast, which she says was a 'special treat' for Our Place beneficiaries, along with his overall volunteerism.

"MS Billanes is an exceptional volunteer, passionate about contributing to a high-needs population," said Barr. "He has exhibited excellent work ethics, amazing compassion, and a full understanding of our values of unconditional love, hope, teamwork, safety, and belonging here at Our Place."

Barr has a lifelong connection with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) that spans three generations. Her two sons are current Royal Canadian Navy members, and she knows their efforts are extraordinary.

"We are grateful to MS Billanes, his family and his colleague from work for their act of kindness and their leadership goes above-and-beyond service to their country," she said.

## A Brighter Future

MS Billanes felt compelled to lend a hand in 2022 after learning about Our Place and its objectives.

"There's fulfilment that comes from

knowing you have made a difference, no matter how small," he said. "It's a great way to spend my spare time, and the purpose it provides enriches my life in countless ways. As a CAF member, I believe in starting from my local community and spreading the compassion and kindness outward."

MS Billanes also knows that helping others is a two-way street. Diagnosed with operational Post Traumatic Stress Disorder stemming from a collision and fire aboard HMCS *Protecteur* in 2013 and 2014, it took him nine years to realize the full extent of the symptoms and to seek help. His condition shows signs of improvement through medical treatment and counselling. He says the volunteerism provides therapeutic value.

"Volunteering helps me deal with stress, anger, worry, and depression," he said. "I feel good when I work with others, and I also make friends, which helps pick me up when I feel down."

MS Billanes was born in the Philippines and moved to Canada in 2004. He joined the military 14 years ago and, after passing his Basic Military Qualification, has been posted to CFB Esquimalt ever since. He is also a talented photographer and has been featured multiple times in the Lookout for his awards in the CAF annual photography contest. These accolades include winning the prestigious Photographer of The Year title in 2016 (Advanced) and 2012 (Novice classification).

He encourages other members to volunteer for community organizations and suggests keeping the work supervisor and chain of command informed so these efforts do not affect operational needs.



Master Sailor Rommel Billanes, Marine Technician of HMCS Calgary, proudly presents a nutritious and delicious breakfast for the residents of Our Place Society. Photos supplied



Left to right: Master Sailor Rommel Billanes, Sophia Billanes, Carolinda Luanzon, and Sailor 1st Class Bindiya Raman. Marine Technician, HMCS Calgary.