



Chef Bruno and Anaheim Club members enjoy a meal together.

# ANAHEIM ANGEL

## NONE OF CHEF BRUNO'S CLUB KIDS GOES TO BED HUNGRY

By John Collins

Every afternoon at 4:30, the vans arrive at the Anaheim White House, an exclusive Italian restaurant owned and operated by chef Bruno Serato. Trays upon trays of hot, fresh, handmade pasta and sauce are retrieved from the kitchen and packed into the van.

By 5:30, the food is delivered to three of the Anaheim Boys & Girls Clubs' five units, where more than 400 Club members eagerly await their pasta dinner. While well-heeled diners pay a premium for Bruno's cuisine, kids can enjoy his fare free almost every day, even on Sundays. During the school year, the Club used to close all weekend. But Serato saw a need to be open on Sundays, so he decided to underwrite the Club's Sunday program. As a result, young people have access to the Club experience – and a fresh, hot dinner – 41 more days a year. On any given day, it's the only hot meal some kids will have.

### MOTEL KIDS

"At least one out of five of our 2,700 members is functionally homeless," said Michael Baker, the Anaheim Club's executive director and a Club professional for more than 20 years.

Baker became aware of Anaheim's "motel kids" more than a decade ago, when he noticed unusually large numbers of young people at play or loitering in motel parking lots. When he stopped and talked to the kids, he discovered that they weren't just hanging out. They and their families, in fact, lived at these motels.

Anaheim is part of Orange County, the southern California community reputed for its affluence. But the OC is not an exclusively wealthy enclave. Not with up to 35,000 homeless people and 26,000 public school students in unstable housing county-wide, as reported by the Illumination Foundation, a local advocacy group for the homeless. A shortage of affordable housing, which sets off a cycle of poverty, is the primary cause. Many who don't earn enough to own or rent a home instead live week-to-week at motels.

According to Baker, weekly motel rates are usually around \$300. This expense makes it difficult for most families to save up the deposit that most leases require, typically two month's rent. "They're literally one step away from being homeless," said Baker. "Some of our kids are in a motel one week, homeless the next."

# HERO OF THE YEAR

Chef Bruno was recently named one of the “Top 10 CNN Heroes for 2011,” which included a \$50,000 grant to continue his service to Anaheim’s youth. All 10 heroes are finalists for “CNN Hero of the Year,” which comes with an additional grant of \$250,000. The winner will be decided by public online vote at [cnnheroes.com](http://cnnheroes.com).

Whether they have a permanent address or not, their Club membership is always in effect. In 2001, Baker helped launch the Club’s Motel Kids Outreach Program to provide these at-risk young people (and those in public housing and foster care) with access to Club programs and services, and the prospect of a great future. Youth in the program receive an annual membership scholarship and transportation to and from Club facilities, six days a week.

## BENIFICENT BRUNO

From the start, the program’s secret ingredient has been Bruno Serato, an active booster of the Anaheim Club since 2001. Over the years, his support has enabled the



Serato loves to serve dinner whenever he can.

Club to significantly expand and enhance its services. Baker recalls the restaurateur once asked him: What is the Club’s greatest need? Baker told the chef one more van would allow the Club to double its progress with motel kids. Within two days, Serato had purchased and delivered a new van, which now transports kids at 10 motels and five public housing complexes.

Serato also underwrites Dance Club, which provides ballet and hip hop lessons. In addition, he is sole sponsor of the Club’s Music Program, which offers members drum, guitar, piano and voice lessons. “Bruno’s generosity has enabled dozens of children who were truly musically gifted, and didn’t even know it, to discover their gift,” said Baker.

But it is pasta night that Chef Bruno is best known for.

## A TRADITION IS BORN



Serato and his mother, Caterina.

In April 2005, Serato’s mother, Caterina, was visiting from Italy. One day when her son gave her a tour of the Club, she saw a boy eating a bag of potato chips. It was 5 p.m., dinner time. Appalled, Caterina told her son he had to make dinner for that boy and all the Club members. When he learned there were 70 kids at the Club, Serato resisted. But his mother would not take no as an answer. The two went to

the restaurant, where they prepared pasta for 70. So the tradition was born.

Six years later, what began with one child has resulted in more than 330,000 hot meals served to Club members. Now Chef Bruno has even bigger goals.

“I would like every Boys & Girls Club in America to follow this program,” said Serato. “If every Club called the chefs in their city, and every chef fed 20 or 30 kids a day, we’d feed every kid in America.”

John Collins is senior writer/editor for BGCA.