

# Toys and gratitude flow for 300 guests at Christmas dinner

By GIA MILLER

Around noon on Christmas Day, Kyle Torre and Jacob Preizler were upstairs in classroom number six of St. Mary's school. They were sorting through over 500 toys to find the perfect items for the young guests sitting at table 21 for the annual Westchester Community Christmas Day Dinner.

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— SUSAN WIRTH,  
CHRISTMAS DAY DINNER GUEST

Mr. Torre and Mr. Preizler, who chose to volunteer as elves that morning, were surrounded — the room was stacked with toys, games, art projects and clothing, all donated by members of the community. Items lined up along the floor of the classroom, and under and in front of tables.

The toy room, which always receives the most donations, held everything from Play-Doh and crayons to friendship bracelets and slime making kits. There were Barbies, sports balls and baby dolls, stuffed animals and Hatchimals, games and books, backpacks and snow suits, all arranged by age groups and, if needed, gender.

Mr. Torre, who was serving as an elf for his fifth time, and Mr. Preizler, who made his elf debut last year, had a full list of requests from the children in attendance. A young boy had requested Legos and a toy car. A teenage girl was seeking new art supplies, headphones, anything with unicorns and scrapbook stickers. Another teenage girl had one request: a new doll.

The 300 guests at the 24th annual Community Christmas Day Dinner were Westchester residents who have encountered financial and other personal struggles, making it difficult or impossible for them purchase food or gifts for themselves and their families on Christmas Day. Shelters and agencies throughout the county provided their names from a list of those who would most benefit from the event. Many at this year's dinner attended for the first time.

For Susan Wirth, a single mom who works as a recreation therapist in a nursing home, the community dinner was a welcome repeat event. Her daughter was 9 years old the first time she participated; now her daughter is 16.

"I feel God's love so much at this dinner," Ms. Wirth said. "I've been on my own since I was 17. I've survived cancer, being run over by a minivan and glaucoma. This dinner makes me happy and thankful."

Ms. Wirth wrote a personal note to Mr. Torre and Mr. Preizler, titled "Dearest Elves," expressing her gratitude and gift requests. Volunteer "elves" collected her letter, along with each guest's request, then accompanied them to the classroom upstairs to retrieve the handpicked gifts.

While the elves were busy upstairs lining the hallway with bags of items for each person, the gymnasium buzzed with activity. Children were making slime, Santa was posing for pictures, adults were sorting through the gently used clothing and people were dancing to the music. But most importantly,



AMY DRUCKER PHOTO

Mia Romero, 16 months old, from North Salem, admires one of the tree decorations at the Westchester Community Christmas Day Dinner.



AMY DRUCKER PHOTOS

Thomas Velasco, 12 and his brother, Peter, of Pleasantville with "Mrs. Santa Claus," Maritza Budiuck.

families were also sitting down to have a Christmas meal together.

Each year, restaurants throughout northern Westchester donate food and offer to cook some of the meal. This past Christmas Day Dinner, approximately 68 restaurants contributed, according to Dawn Greenberg, who coordinates the event's food and beverages.

"The big challenge is to get 38 turkeys cooked," Ms. Greenberg explained. For that, the turkeys "go all over northern Westchester, to places like the Waccabuc Country Club and La Fontaine," she said. "Other restaurants may make pans of ziti or mashed potatoes, and some contribute pies. We have a pretty set menu and don't like to divert. It's usually the same restaurants doing the same thing every year, which is great. All of the restaurants come right back to do it for us again and again."

"We appreciate that, this year, they did it over a holiday weekend when they were so busy," she continued. "We appreciate the fact that they take the time to cook for us. Cooking 10 turkeys is a production, especially when you have a restaurant full of guests."

The dinner's reputation has become so well-known in the community, according to Ms. Greenberg, that even new restaurants, such as Katonah Woods and the Whitlock in Katonah, eagerly volunteered to pitch in. They cooked turkeys and made pasta, potatoes and rice for the dinner.

As guests enjoyed their meal, the elves continued to select items for each person at the table. In addition to the toy room, there was a room for women's items and another for men's. Although the adult guests typically receive fewer gift donations than the children, the rooms contained a wide variety of items. For women, there was jewelry, makeup, toiletries, hand-knitted scarves and hats, clothing and shoes. The men's room contained gloves, earmuffs, socks, scarves, slippers and clothing.

After the meal was over and the last bags of gifts were delivered to the guests, volunteers continued to work. In the kitchen, workers quickly packed up food into containers for families to take with them. The volunteer clean-up crew went into gear, collecting trash. Throughout the event and after-

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ward, volunteers happily reconnected with friends they had not seen in a while.

Ben Harvey and Licia Sandberg, the organizers of the annual event, said that many volunteers return year after year. The dinner not only serves the guests, but the volunteers as well, creating a space for friendships to begin and to be renewed, they noted. Volunteers, explained Mr. Harvey, scour the sign-up sheets to see which co-workers will join them on their shifts. First-time volunteers immediately feel comfortable, joining the spirit of the event, they said.

"The guests were not met with volunteers who were putting on a dinner for them," explained Ms. Sandberg. "Instead, it was all about, and always is, volunteers and guests celebrating Christmas together. And that makes all the difference in the world."

Mr. Harvey and Ms. Sandberg said that the event's repeated success reflects the commitment and efforts of the volunteers, who make the day run seamlessly every year. Even before the actual dinner, many

volunteers perform critical tasks, such as collecting toys or clothing, organizing deliveries and sorting items prior to Christmas Day.

"This is truly a community project," Mr. Harvey said. "So many people volunteer for behind-the-scenes jobs that have very little glamour. But, all it takes is one kind word of appreciation from a dinner guest or one glance at a happy face and the day becomes totally fulfilling."

Once the event was over, the tired, happy children and adults headed home. The next morning, members of the John Jay wrestling team, who set up the event the day before, returned to remove the rented equipment and return St. Mary's school back to normal.

In a month or so, Mr. Harvey, Ms. Sandberg and the event team leaders will sit down to debrief and brainstorm for next year's Community Christmas Day Dinner.

By the middle of next summer, Mr. Harvey and Ms. Sandberg can be expected to start regularly texting each other, sometimes as early as 5 a.m., to plan the next one.



Volunteer carvers John and Gail Conneely, Mike Berardino and David Amerling.



Volunteer Nico Bittker from Bedford Hills, left, working on the buffet service line.



"Elf" Becky Sussman of Bedford Hills shares a smile with a dinner guest.



Quinn Washburn holding a selection of hats knitted by volunteers.