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Annual Whiteaker Thanksgiving Dinner Brings Community Together

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The event includes far more than food, and can always use more volunteers

By Joanna Bartlett



What started as a small community coming together in 1974 to help a broke young mother and her four small kids have a Thanksgiving dinner has grown to feed thousands.

This year's Whiteaker Free Community Thanksgiving Dinner is expected to bring more than 2,300 people together for a day-long celebration of warmth and community sharing.

"Our saying is 'neighbors helping neighbors,'" says Beverly Farfan, the event's lead coordinator. "We figure it's a big party. It's a celebration of caring and sharing with each other. That's how it started many years ago, and that's what continues today."

The annual dinner celebration started in 1978 when that young mother and her neighbors decided to repay the generosity she'd received by offering a free Thanksgiving meal to anyone in need. The dinner took a brief hiatus but was revived again in 1988. Since then, the annual celebration has continued, making this its 27th consecutive year.

Over the years, it's grown from a simple Thanksgiving meal to an entire day of helping those in need and forging community connections.

"I get there at 5:30 in the morning, and there are people in line," Farfan says. She's been coordinating the event for the last 20 years.

"We have a welcome tent with coffee and hot chocolate and tea and rolls, so people can get something to eat and get warm right away." Tents are donated by the Airport Rotary Club.

At 8 a.m., volunteers start handing out blankets, sleeping bags, hats, gloves and rain gear to those who want or need the items.

That's not the end, though, for those people. "Then they filter into the free store, which is full of clothes, shoes and toiletries," Farfan says. After that, it's time for flu shots, administered by students in Lane Community College's Nursing Program. And then - starting at 11 a.m. - Thanksgiving dinner.

"It's not like a soup kitchen at all," Farfan says. "Everybody sits down at dinner. You can be a volunteer, a guest, anybody can come. People who are in need come. And sometimes, the need is just to be with other people, to not be alone."

Along with the food, a kids activity area keeps little ones occupied, and musicians provide entertainment.

Dinner involves the usual Thanksgiving feast—a buffet dinner of turkey, potatoes, gravy, stuffing, and yams and other vegetables. Farfan estimates the community group serves more than 1,700 lbs of turkey, 500 lbs each of potatoes and yams, more than 100 loaves of bread—and, for the vegetarians, more than 150 lbs of tofu. And then there's dessert.

"There's lots of good food and lots and lots of great desserts," Farfan says. "We've never run out of food."

Most of the food is donated, but Whiteaker Community Dinners, the nonprofit organization that formed to keep the annual dinners going, purchases turkeys every year, along with the outdoor weather gear. "We do need a little bit of money," Farfan says. "As soon as the money comes in, we go out and buy more stuff to give away."

The event also needs volunteers. All the work is donated by various community groups and individuals—chefs at LCC's Culinary Arts program (see Vanessa Salvia's companion story), musicians like The Traceys and The Lost River Band, emcee Paul Biondi, and the hundreds of volunteers who set up, clean up, staff donation drop off locations, give people rides to the event, and keep everything running smoothly.

"People are always so excited about what they do. Different organizations, groups and individuals have taken ownership of their part of the puzzle," Farfan says. "It's a community event put on by the community."

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