



Volunteers steal the show at the annual Christmas Day Dinner

By GIA MILLER

On Christmas Day, the hottest ticket in town was not a dinner at the Inn at Pound Ridge by Jean-Georges. It was a volunteer post at the 23rd annual Westchester Community Christmas Day Dinner at St. Mary's School's school. Coordinated by Katonah residents and neighbors Ben Harvey and Licia Sandberg, the event is so popular that the rush to get a slot as a volunteer could be said to rival scoring tickets to a favorite concert.

"My mom woke up at 4 a.m., Nov. 1, to sign us up for a spot," said Sarah Lewen, who served salad along with her boyfriend and mother. "We volunteer every year on Christmas Day, and it just fills me up. We're usually at a soup kitchen in Brooklyn, but they closed. Of all of the years that I've volunteered, I'm amazed at how buttoned-up they are here. The food looks amazing and everything is perfectly executed."

These coveted spots and flawless execution are the result of a year's worth of hard work from Mr. Harvey and Ms. Sandberg, who have already begun planning 2017's dinner, after taking just one day off on Dec. 26.

"We believe no one should be alone or hungry on Christmas Day," explained Mr. Harvey.

That motto is the driving force behind every action made by the volunteers before and during the event, which was held in the gymnasium at St. Mary's School in Katonah. It's what led Ann Albert, who runs the kitchen with her husband, John, to reach into her handbag and find a candy cane to give to the one little boy who did not receive a piece of cake.

That same holiday spirit is alive in the "elves," under the watchful eye of "head elf" Lauren Torre, who gather at the entrance to applaud and greet each dinner guest as they arrive, and then wish them well as they leave. Throughout the dinner, the elves worked tirelessly to assist each guest, asking children and adults what they wanted for Christmas, and then heading to the toy- and clothing-filled rooms to fulfill their requests.

"Our community really comes together for this event," Ms. Torre said. "We all help each other and send a message of love and giving. My team is here to spread that spirit and bring joy. It's truly rewarding to make the time to help others on Christmas Day, and I believe it's an important lesson for both the young and old."

Many regulars dedicate themselves to the annual dinner, giving up part of their hol-

'I was worried that we'd have no place to go on Christmas and I didn't know what would happen.'

— GLENDA VAZQUEZ, WHO ATTENDED THE DINNER WITH HER THREE CHILDREN AFTER BEING DISPLACED FROM HER BABBITT ROAD RESIDENCE

iday to help their neighbors. Maritza Budiuck, who serves the dual role of the event's emcee and Mrs. Clause, is humbled every year. "What we do for these families brings you back to reality," Ms. Budiuck explained. "You work hard all year to try and improve yourself and make money, but then you come here on Christmas Day and it's a reminder that not everyone is as fortunate."

Every year, the dinner's message is spread a bit further as new volunteers join the dinner, committed to helping those in need enjoy their holiday. This year, guests were treated to a visit from a trained therapy dog, a collie, appropriately named Dancer. The dog's owners, Cory and Cherie Claus, contacted Mr. Harvey to help spread the holiday cheer.

"We wanted to do some holiday work with Dancer this year," Mr. Claus explained. "We reached out to several organizations, but this is the one that did the work to get us here. A lot happened behind the scenes, such as obtaining the proper insurance, to make sure that Dancer could come today and spend time with all of the guests."

What the guests see during their time at the dinner is only a portion of what goes in to making the annual event a success. Behind the scenes is an entire volunteer staff, many of whom raced to sign up Nov. 1, that manage the myriad of details.

For example, each year, Dawn Greenberg organizes a crew of approximately 10 volunteers to call 60 to 70 local restaurants, requesting their participation in the dinner during their busy season. She then organizes another 10 helpers to pick up the food donations.

"A lot of restaurants contribute year after year to the dinner," said Ms. Greenberg. "It's become a part of their annual routine, but it's such a busy time of the year that we need



AMY DRUCKER PHOTO

Lourdes Andrade and Paul Ritzcovan volunteering as carvers on Christmas morning before guests arrived for the annual event.



It takes 32 volunteers to staff the buffet line at the annual dinner.

to remind them. They are always so generous, even offering their services to cook for the meal. Waccabuc Country Club alone cooks 12 of the turkeys every year."

In the kitchen, Mr. and Ms. Albert make certain that no food goes to waste. What is not eaten is packed into containers and placed in reusable shopping bags, courtesy of Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, for each family to take home for dinner that evening. Any remaining food is distributed to local shelters. Even the event's waste goes to good use.

"We recycle and compost almost everything from the meal, and there was only one bag of actual garbage from the entire day," explained Luke Padian, a high school student who worked the garbage detail this year. Luke has volunteered

with his family for several years on the days leading up to the dinner. This year, they chose to participate at the dinner itself but learned they did not sign up in time. "You don't choose garbage, garbage chooses you," he joked.

Mr. Harvey and Ms. Sandberg work for a full year to make sure that every guest will receive exactly what they need at the dinner, all without the organizers needing to spend a dime.

Toy and clothing donations are collected from town residents and local businesses and organizations; walk-in fridges and catering equipment comes from local schools and restaurants; garbage and recycling equipment is provided by Suburban Carting. In addition, art supplies are donated, a masseuse is secured, and many other goods



AMY DRUCKER PHOTOS

Christmas dinner guest Naveah Morris, age 2.

and services are arranged. "This dinner couldn't be done without the hundreds of people who donate to this event each year," said Ms. Torre. "For example, the Kiwanis Club provided us with eight cases of new coats, and we also received about 100 new pairs of pajamas for children. What may be a stocking stuffer to us is an actual need for our guests, and our community comes together to make this happen."

This year, a local emergency affecting dozens of residents added yet another dimension to the organizing challenge for Mr. Harvey and Ms. Sandberg. Just days before the dinner, they invited the 50 residents of the Bedford Hills apartment complex who were displaced due to a carbon monoxide leak at their complex on Babbitt Road. The last-minute additions required more food, more gifts, more tables and chairs, and more space, making the 2016 dinner the biggest one on record.

"Last Sunday night, the owner of our apartment put us in the Holiday Inn and we have been there for one week," said Glenda Vasquez, who attended the dinner with her three children. "I was worried that we'd have no place to go on Christmas and I didn't know what would happen. But on Thursday we were invited to the Christmas Dinner, and I'm so excited to be here and celebrate with everyone."

By the end of the day, which wrapped up about 3 p.m., toddlers were sleeping on their mom's shoulders, families were looking at their pictures with Santa, children were excitedly opening their new gifts, and the volunteers were smiling. They made magic happen, and they can't wait to do it again.