

RECORD REVIEW

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AMY DRUCKER PHOTO

A car packed with meals and gifts on the way to a Westchester family.

Christmas Dinner, adapting again, delivers deep rewards

By GIA MILLER

For the second year in a row, the gymnasium at St. Mary's School in Katonah was dark and quiet on Christmas Day. For the second year in a row, it was a wet, windy and overcast day. For the second year in a row, volunteers stayed in their cars. And yet, despite another year without a buffet full of food and overflowing

plates, Santa and Mrs. Claus, music or a kids' craft table, Ben Harvey, Lauren Torre and Jamer Breene still managed to save Christmas for 235 residents of northern Westchester and 10 on-duty first responders.

The 28th Westchester Annual Christmas Dinner was, once again, a virtual event, requiring the three event coordi-

nators and a small handful of volunteers to spend hours outside of the school on Christmas morning. Like last year, they loaded volunteers' vehicles with food and gifts to be delivered to area residents, but this year, the temperature was 10 degrees colder.

Volunteers drove into the makeshift
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Christmas Dinner volunteers out in force

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receiving line at their scheduled time and waited patiently to have their trunks and back seats filled with Christmas goodies.

“Unfortunately, we found ourselves having to pivot for another Christmas Dinner due to COVID-19,” said Ms. Torre. “Although we couldn’t host everyone at St. Mary’s as we usually do, we were thrilled to be able to bring some holiday cheer to our guests. The ability of our volunteers to do whatever necessary to make this work is astounding.”

First time volunteers Brad and Samantha Holcman, along with their daughters Charlotte and Eleanor, typically travel to see family during Christmas, but they chose to stay home this year due to COVID-19. While they have done other volunteer work on Christmas, participating in the Christmas Dinner for the first time was the silver lining, she said, to staying home this year.

“This time of year can be very hard for people,” said Ms. Holcman. “To be able to make it a little bit easier for another family is an incredible blessing.”

As Ms. Holcman’s husband, Brad, drove their family from Katonah to Mount Kisco, they discussed the family they would meet, which included three adults and 5- and 7-year-old boys.

“We’re helping people who can’t afford to buy Christmas dinner and presents for their kids,” said Charlotte Holcman, a fifth-grade student at Katonah Elementary School. “And we’re delivering it so their kids can get what they want on Christmas.”

She and her younger sister, Eleanor, who is in second grade, were eager to help carry the food and gifts to the door. They all wore masks and disposable gloves and walked to the door with their arms full of goodies.

The girls loved witnessing the little boys’ excitement as they ran off to play with their brand new Legos. As soon as they got back in their car, Eleanor immediately began planning for next year.

“We should dress like elves and wear Santa hats,” she exclaimed. “That would make it even more special for the kids who answer the door.”

But, for the adults, the impact of this one gesture was deeply meaningful.

“It made the world seem a lot smaller,” said Ms. Holcman. “It makes me want to do more.” Her husband agreed.

Another volunteer, who asked that his name not be used, echoed that sentiment.

“I was only in their apartment for a couple of minutes, but I will always remember the joy that was shared at that very brief moment,” he said.

To make it all work, Mr. Harvey, Ms. Torre and Ms. Emmer spend months planning and organizing. During the 26 years of in-person events, the Christmas Dinner has accepted donations in the form of goods — toys, games, art supplies, books, new and used clothing, beauty products, etc., as well as gift cards and cash. Ms. Torre and several elves used the gift cards and cash to fill holes in the gift lineup, such as items for men since those donated items tend to be minimal.

In past years, on Christmas Day the elves went to each table and asked the guests what they’d like for Christmas. Then, they rushed upstairs with the wish list to fill bags with goods that were either a perfect match or most closely resembled the guests’ requests. If any toys or items were left over at the end of the event, they were stored for the next year.

But for the past two years, asking on Christmas morning was impossible. Instead, the organizers have only accepted cash donations so they could buy what each family wanted or needed. In the weeks leading up to this past Christmas, six elves phoned each recipient family and asked for every family member’s age, size, favorite color and gift requests. Then, 48 shoppers took those lists to the store, buying as many items as they could to match each wish list.

On Christmas morning, volunteers made 73 deliveries to 56 families and 17 individuals who were alone on Christmas Day.

“In the ordinary years of the Christmas Dinner, the food, clothing and gifts for our guests are donated by area residents and local businesses,” said Mr. Harvey. “In this pandemic year, mostly

all of our resources needed to be purchased. Through the generous financial support of our community, we were able to bring Christmas to the doorsteps of many, many families and people living alone. Thank you, Westchester!”

For the second year in a row, Village Social, a Mount Kisco restaurant, supplied the food at cost and donated their kitchen and staff time to cater the entire meal.

Beth Harvey and her 18-year-old daughter, Kate, delivered their Christmas packages to an older woman who lived alone in Pound Ridge. Even though she said she didn’t want any gifts, the event coordinators had other ideas. When Ms. Harvey explained this, the guest’s face lit up, and she expressed her gratefulness for the kind gesture.

Kate, who has participated in the event since she was a baby, says the Christmas Dinner has given her a different perspective on Christmas compared to her peers.

“To me, the meaning of Christmas is about coming together and sharing a special day with your loved ones, exchanging gifts and appreciating everything that you have,” she said. “But I also know that some people are really struggling because I’ve seen it firsthand. I’ve had this amazing opportunity with the Christmas Dinner to give people food and gifts. It’s such an honor to be a part of it. It’s great to see people smile and see how thankful they are for what we do.”

But it’s not only children whose perspective may be skewed.

“We live in such an isolated bubble here in northern Westchester,” said the anonymous volunteer. “It’s so easy to forget about families who live 10 miles away in unfit housing and struggle to get by day to day.”

Like everyone who is involved in the Christmas Dinner, Ms. Torre is grateful and hopeful.

“The spirit of the community is humbling, and we can’t thank everyone enough,” she said. “We’re looking forward to Christmas 2022 and crossing our fingers that we’ll be welcoming guests once more.”