

A young girl with dark hair and floral hair clips is hugging a man in a Santa Claus costume. The girl is wearing a red velvet Santa suit with white fur trim and silver lace. The man is also wearing a red velvet Santa suit with white fur trim. The background is slightly blurred, showing a Christmas tree and warm indoor lighting.

Spreading Holiday Cheer

BY GIA MILLER

The Westchester Christmas Dinner, now in its 29th year, is a special tradition in our community. Typically held in the gymnasium at St. Mary's School in Katonah, many of our neighbors spend their Christmas morning serving those less fortunate. So, for this teen story, we chose to connect with Kate Harvey and Luke Torre who grew up watching their parents organize and volunteer at The Dinner. Even before their earliest memories, their parents spent Christmas mornings serving those who don't have enough money to purchase food or gifts for themselves and/or their family on Christmas Day. When Harvey and Torre became old enough to volunteer, they jumped right in.

Kate Harvey and Luke Torre were still in elementary school when they first chose to spend their Christmas morning helping those less fortunate. Just kids themselves, their decision meant they couldn't celebrate Christmas (or open presents) until the early afternoon. Instead, they spent their morning volunteering at The Westchester Annual Christmas Dinner. Harvey's dad, Ben, and Torre's mom, Lauren, are two of the three co-coordinators of the event, and the kids wanted to follow in their parents' (as well as older siblings' in Torre's case) generous footsteps.

"I thought what my dad was doing was really cool, and I was excited to finally help out with my mom and run the craft table together," says Harvey who is now 19 years old and a freshman at The University of Fairfield. "When I first volunteered at The Dinner at nine years old, I was a bit surprised. There was a huge crowd of families at their tables, lots of people moving around and loud music playing – I thought it was great! It was amazing to see how many happy faces there were because of what we were doing. It was very exciting."

For the past 28 years, The Westchester Annual Christmas Dinner has treated about 300 of the neediest people and families in Westchester to a gourmet meal (courtesy of local restaurants) and a festive, celebratory event. There's typically a holiday picture booth, craft tables, entertainment featuring Mrs. Claus as the emcee, holiday gifts and, of course, Santa.





For Torre, who is now 18 years old and a freshman at The University of Alabama, even though he was with his family, giving up his Christmas morning at only eight years old wasn't as easy for him. That first year, he was a bit upset that he'd decided to volunteer, but as the years went on, he realized the event's importance.

"There are so many reasons why I like doing this," he says. "Sometimes it's the little things, like watching everyone's reaction when Santa comes in – they're always so excited to see him, and it's really awesome. It's also so amazing to watch people's moods change. Some adults come in a little down because they're struggling, but as they're there, I watch them become so joyful and happy. And then, at the end of the day, when we give them their gifts, watching their reactions is incredible. They're so happy, and the kids can't wait to play with their new toys."

Even though COVID-19 forced the co-coordinators to transition to a model that delivered meals and gifts to guests' homes, both teens knew this work was too important to stop. For the past two years, Harvey spent the days leading up to Christmas helping her dad and Torre's mom organize all the clothing and toys so that each family received gifts that met their wants and needs. Then, on the day of, she and her mom delivered a meal and gifts to a family. Torre, along with several others,

began his morning at Village Social in Mt. Kisco, where they picked up all the food the restaurant prepared for the families. After bringing the food to St. Mary's so each volunteer could pick up and deliver the meals and gifts, he and his father made a delivery of their own. But he also remained involved throughout the year.

"Honestly, the planning happens throughout the year, it's not like a two-week thing where you send people out to buy gifts," he explains. "The Dinner has a storage locker, and we begin putting things in storage right after Christmas. Whenever my mom needed help, I'd drive to pick up a bunch of gifts from somebody's house and drop them off at the storage locker. It's really year-round."

Although they've both had a front-row seat to The Dinner for years, volunteering has always been their choice, and it's helped shaped their lives. Torre says The Dinner created a very close bond between him, his siblings and their parents. And although his siblings are now adults and no longer live in the area, they still come in every year to volunteer at the dinner.

Harvey and her parents also volunteer at food pantries throughout the year, and, through school, she's also volunteered at The Boys & Girls Club in Mt. Kisco.

"Being a volunteer at The Dinner is a way for me to



Manhattan Style



Westchester Charm

show that I really care,” says Harvey. “I want to give all the guests a great day, make sure they're happy and help them forget about everything they might be going through in that moment. I always enjoy talking to the guests and even dancing with them. I try to get to know them a little bit – I ask them how they're doing and if they're having a good day. I love being a volunteer, and it holds a special place in my heart.”

“It’s such a good feeling, knowing that I’ve helped people,” Torre adds. “It drives me to continue to do it every year. In fact, I think everybody should do this. I’ve gotten a couple of my friends to volunteer with me, and once they do it once, they don’t stop. They come back every year.”

Editor's Note: The Dinner will be remote again this year, but they're increasing the number of deliveries from 235 to 300. To learn more about The Christmas Dinner or sign up to become a volunteer, click on the QR code below. 

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